



CHRISTIANITIES OF THE WORLD

Christianity in Oman

Ibadism, Religious Freedom,
and the Church

Andrew David Thompson

palgrave
macmillan

Christianities of the World

The early modern period was witness to an incipient process of transculturation through exploration, mercantilism, colonization, and migration that set into motion a process of globalization that continues today. The purpose of this series is to bring together a cultural studies approach - which freely and unapologetically crosses disciplinary, theoretical, and political boundaries - with early modern texts and artefacts that bear the traces of transculturalization and globalization in order to deepen our understanding of sites of exchange between and within early modern culture(s). This process can be studied on a large as well as on a small scale, and this new series is dedicated to both. Possible topics of interest include, but are not limited to: texts dealing with mercantilism, travel, exploration, immigration, foreigners, enabling technologies (such as shipbuilding and navigational instrumentation), mathematics, science, rhetoric, art, architecture, intellectual history, religion, race, sexuality, and gender.

More information about this series at
<http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/14893>

Andrew David Thompson

Christianity in Oman

Ibadism, Religious Freedom, and the Church

palgrave
macmillan

Andrew David Thompson
St Andrew's Church
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Christianities of the World

ISBN 978-3-030-30397-6

ISBN 978-3-030-30398-3 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30398-3>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2019

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: John Warburton-Lee Photography / Alamy Stock Photo

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*I dedicate this book to the staff of Al Amana Centre, past and present, and
all the Omanis with whom they have worked to promote peace and
understanding between religions.*

FOREWORD

I am delighted to offer this Foreword to Andy Thompson's new book—the latest in a string of interesting works on Christianity in Arab lands. He is generous in spreading the knowledge he has gained in many years of faithful ministry, particularly in the countries of the Gulf.

Those who know Oman will benefit greatly from the history and analysis in this book. From his wide reading, and from the interviews he has conducted with a cross-section of religious figures, officials and other individuals in Oman, Andy Thompson has been able to give us a history of Ibadism from its earliest days and its relationship with the Christians who have migrated to, or sojourned in, Oman. For a number of reasons—which Andy explains to us—knowledge of Ibadism is not widespread in English-language literature about the region. We are reminded that for nearly all Omanis, their national identity and their religious adherence (to Ibadism) are virtually coterminous.

Present-day Omanis also remind us that their religious observance is inseparably linked to a feeling of tolerance of the other. They quote to us the wisdom of God in creating people with their differences (Qur'an 11: 118), and the injunction that '[t]here is no compulsion in religion' (Qur'an 2: 256). I recall that, when I was living in Muscat in the early 2000s, the periodical issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs was entitled *Tasāmuḥ*, 'mutual tolerance' (the word strongly conveys the sense of a two-way street). We do well to build on these sentiments in our inter-faith dealings, and it is my hope that this book will help us to do that.

We could perhaps say that Omanis demonstrate a deep sense of quiet self-confidence which may spring from their particular religious history—a history not experienced by any other Arab nation. Other Ibadi communities exist, for example in North Africa, but they do not have the same national connections as is the case in Oman. This may influence the way in which Omanis handle their relationships with other ‘people of the book’, giving them a method of choosing their own path in determining their relationships, without reference to models followed elsewhere.

We might ask if we can go further. Andy Thompson is a priest in the Anglican Communion, operating in the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf. When he meets Muslims in Oman and elsewhere in Arabia, some may be aware of the position that Anglicanism holds amid the currents of belief and practice among Christian churches. It may not be too fanciful to suppose that Omanis with that degree of awareness may see in Anglicanism some comparison or resonance with Ibadism’s own situation with regard to other currents of Islam. Readers of this book may look for strands of evidence to support (or perhaps to undermine!) this line of thinking.

Andy Thompson’s research and writing open up these and related questions for fresh examination and analysis. We owe him a debt of gratitude for providing the tools to do this, at a time when informed approaches to interfaith and international issues are as important as they have ever been.

Corpus Christi College
Cambridge, UK

Stuart Laing

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is based on my research which was funded with generous donations from the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, the St Luke's Foundation and to a generous Emirati donor from Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

In addition to the library of the University of Gloucestershire, I also benefitted from access to regional information through the libraries of Sheikh Zayed University and the New York University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The Georgetown University library at the School of Foreign Affairs has been invaluable, as well as the resources of the Al Amana Centre in Oman and the College of Islamic Sciences in Muscat.

I thank Dr Roy Jackson for his steady guidance throughout the project. Thanks to Reverend Douglas Leonard, Reverend Aaro Rytkonen and Reverend Justin Meyers of the Al Amana Centre, for hospitality and valuable insight in Oman. To the Omanis who gave me their time and thoughts, thank you. You know who you are.

To Ahmed and Luke Yarbrough for translating the Arabic sources into English and to Terry Workman for transcribing the interviews, I am in their debt. To all those whom I interviewed, this research would not have been possible without you. Thank you.

This research brought me into contact with a wide variety of Christian leaders ranging from Roman Catholics through to Evangelicals. In addition, it has been a great joy to meet Islamic scholars and leaders in the region too. It was a privilege to learn of their work and see ministry in the region through their eyes.

To those who read, edited and commented on the evolving script, thank you. These include John Everington, Jill Duncan, Sue Partridge, Justin Meyer and Helen Verghese.

I am honoured that Palgrave Macmillan have taken on this project and I applaud Philip Getz, G. Nirmal Kumar and Amy Invernizzi for their professionalism and support in guiding me through the process of publication. Thank you.

Finally, to my family, to Ben and Kathryn for a super critical edit of the script. Last, but not least, huge gratitude to Navina, my ever-supporting wife. None of this would be possible without you.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction: A Church in Oman	1
2	Studying the Arabian Context	11
3	Beginnings: The Early Church	27
4	Ibadi Theology and Christian Engagement	53
5	Early Encounters Between Christians and Muslims in Oman	85
6	Missionary Impact	95
7	Trade and Rentierism	121
8	State Governance of the Church	135

9	The Church Today and the Future of Interfaith	145
10	Conclusion	157
	Bibliography	167
	Index	179

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reverend Canon Andrew David Thompson, MBE is the Senior Anglican Chaplain of St Andrew's Church in Abu Dhabi. He holds degrees in Behavioural Sciences (B.Sc. (Hons) Polytechnic of Wales) and Religious Studies (M.A. Res. University of Nottingham) and has been trained as a priest for the Church of England at Wycliffe Hall, which is a Permanent Private Hall of Oxford University. He was ordained into the priesthood in Derby Cathedral.

His previous publications include *The Christian Church in Kuwait: Religious Freedom in the Gulf* (2010), *Christianity in the UAE: Culture and Heritage* (2011), and *Jesus of Arabia* (2014). His most recent book *A Celebration of Tolerance: Religious Minorities in the UAE* was released in January 2019.

In 2011 he received the MBE from Queen Elizabeth II for services to Human Rights and Interfaith Dialogue in Kuwait. He is a Canon of Bahrain Cathedral and the Chairman of the Board for the Al Amana Centre, an Interfaith Resource based in Muscat, Oman.



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Church in Oman

I was not prepared for the beauty of Oman when I first travelled there. Of all the countries in the Arabian Peninsula, it has the most diverse landscape and climate: mountains, deserts, picturesque harbours nestled against craggy cliffs, wadis and fresh water streams, oases and gardens, blistering bone-dry heat, as well as monsoon winds and rains.

It is a nation with a long and glorious history of maritime trade, stretching from China and India to the East coast of Africa. From sultan to shopkeeper, farmer to craftsman, the citizens of Oman embrace a surprising diversity of cultural heritage ranging from Baluchi, Persian and Yemeni to East African. They live in desert encampments, remote mountain communities, coastal fishing villages and urban cities.

Oman is little known in the West; the main reason for this is because, until recently, there were few Western travellers there. A hostile climate and terrain, as well as tribes zealously guarding their regions, were obstacles that discouraged a casual visit.

Like their neighbouring countries on the Arabian Peninsula, Oman's main religion is Islam. All Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) brought a message from God, which would enable whole societies to live in peace with their creator and neighbours. To enable these new communities to flourish, God reveals his divine law through the prophet which governs every aspect of life: from trade to marriage, from warfare to personal hygiene. To interpret and apply these laws, four schools of scholars and lawyers have evolved in Sunni Islamic history: Hanbali, Hanafi,

Maliki and Shafi'. Yet there is a fifth school which is unique to Oman (although there are pockets which can be found in North Africa and Zanzibar today), and that is the Ibadi school of Islam. Far from being a modern innovation, Ibadis can trace their roots right back to the origins of the Islamic faith, and today many Omanis see their identity as being intrinsically bound up with being an Ibadi Muslim.

So, Oman is an Islamic nation on the Eastern shore of the Arabian Peninsula. Its immediate neighbour is Saudi Arabia, which is known for implementing a distinctive but strict form of Islam. Unlike Saudi Arabia, the greatest surprise for Western visitors to Oman is that there is freedom to worship. As one Omani scholar explains,

I think the biggest factor in the tolerance of the Omanis, is the Ibadi doctrine.

Oman's people welcome strangers and foreigners, driven by their nature, religion and culture, irrespective of the foreigner's creed or religion. Oman's people are interested only in good morals and good behaviour and if someone manifests good character, and conducts themselves decently, we do not question them about their beliefs or religion, we leave that to God.

I have not heard of a Christian who has been treated badly in Oman because of his religion or his faith. This has been the case since our ancestors and is still the case to date. For example, these days we find temples and schools in the Indian communities, as well as churches, and as far as I know, we have not heard of a single incident of Omanis ill-treating or denying others the right to practice their religions, as far as I know. But God only knows!¹

GOING TO CHURCH IN OMAN

The first thing that hits you when you attend worship at the Ruwi church compound in Muscat is that despite the huge parking lot, there are no spaces left. The parking is chaos and one is lucky to find space, even by illegally parking on the kerb. The competition for parking spaces can be decidedly unchristian.

The next noteworthy detail is the noise. There are different languages and different styles of music ranging from traditional hymns and chants to chorus music played by contemporary bands. There is always more than one service taking place at any given time, held in multiple rooms and halls. Organ music from one congregation blends in the air with the rhythmic clapping and drumming which bursts out of another room; the sound

¹ Anon. Interviewed by: Thompson (12 December 2015).

of chanting from an ancient liturgy adds to the cacophonous atmosphere of worship. As soon as one congregation concludes their worship, they leave the hall only to be replaced by another congregation who will worship in yet another language or tradition. During the course of a typical Friday (the main day off for most workers in Oman), literally thousands of worshippers congregate throughout the day.

Finally, you will notice that the church is truly international. Indian and Filipino worshippers far outnumber those from Western countries; in between there are Arabs (mainly from Egypt and the Levant), Africans (especially from Ethiopia and Nigeria) and Koreans. Buildings are shared between the Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches. The biggest community by far is the Roman Catholic Church. It hosts thousands of worshippers every week with masses held in different languages. This is just one example of the many denominations which meet in five different locations in Oman.

WHY THIS BOOK?

For those not familiar with Oman, or indeed with the Arabian Gulf, the presence of a flourishing church community (or communities) comes as a surprise. This surprise is because we are constantly bombarded with negative images from the Arabian Peninsula which convey narratives of persecution against religious minorities and oppressive regimes implementing harsh systems of justice. There is a dearth of reliable information in current academia regarding the religious communities of the Arabian Gulf. This book aims to tell the story of the church in the region, specifically in Oman.

For the last 20 years, I have had the (occasionally uncomfortable) position of mediator in interfaith relations between Christians and Muslims in the Muslim majority countries of Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and most regions in the Arabian Gulf. As a Christian priest who has resided and worked in many of these countries as a visible representative of the church, it has been fascinating to experience the diverse ways in which different Muslim authorities relate to the Christian communities in their midst. Despite the secular constitution of Turkey, my personal experience of Christian ministry there can only be described as fraught. In contrast, in my role as the Anglican priest in Abu Dhabi, my relationships with the ruling families in the United Arab Emirates are very cordial.

This diverse range of experiences has led me to ask ‘what factors determine the response of an Islamic government towards the local Christian community?’

When I ask Gulf Arabs themselves, the usual answer I get is that it is economic concern which drives the quality of interfaith relations. It is believed that a secure and diverse economy results in openness to trade with the religious other.² Yet when one surveys the Arabian Gulf States, we see significantly varying levels of religious freedom in Gulf States with similar economies. Rather, this disparity in religious freedom across the Gulf appears to me to be reflected by the interpretation and application of the particular school of Islam to which each state subscribes. These Islamic theological understandings and practices range from a complete prohibition of Christian worship in Saudi Arabia through to multiple churches and other religions enjoying freedom to openly worship in Bahrain, despite both countries having similar trading interests and economies. When I raise the possibility with Gulf Arabs that their school of Islam might play a significant factor in their approach to Christians, I am immediately confronted with an abrupt dismissal of this suggestion. So, does Islamic theology determine the treatment of Christians in a Muslim country?

This question has provoked me to explore the subject in more detail and led to the discovery that there is very little in the way of research in this area, especially with regard to my chosen field of Oman.

WHY OMAN?

I have chosen Oman as my subject country for several reasons. Firstly, Oman is unique for being the home of Ibadi Islam. As my focus in this study is to examine how Islamic theology impacts upon the Christian community, it would be interesting to see if there is a distinct difference in the interpretation of Islamic sectarian thought, and how it is manifested through government policy and behaviour.

Secondly, Oman is one of the neighbouring countries to the one in which I currently reside (the United Arab Emirates) and so is easy to access. As an Anglican priest, I am connected with colleagues throughout

²The work of Brian Grim is outstanding in showing the relationship between religious freedom and economic stability. See, for example, Grim, J.B. (2010). *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the region and can gain access to Christian leaders, local university libraries and a variety of Islamic leaders.

Thirdly, when I travel back to the UK from the Arabian Gulf, I often speak at different churches and organisations about my work as a priest. A common refrain I hear is '[w]e did not think the church would be allowed to exist in the Arabian Gulf'. Many listeners are informed by stereotypes of the region that are largely based on reports about countries such as Saudi Arabia. In regard to other parts of the Gulf, this is not an accurate portrayal. In general, people in the West do not know very much about the Arabian Gulf and this is what motivates me to raise awareness. My message is that there *are* Muslim countries where the Christian church functions well, with attitudes that vary from tolerance to acceptance. Christians are not persecuted in these countries. Oman is celebrated as an Islamic nation where the church flourishes and, outwardly, religious freedom is practised.

Again, the response of people in the UK to this message is surprise. The question that is raised again is '[w]hy does the Church suffer terribly in some Islamic countries and not in others?' Perhaps the answer lies in how governmental agencies interpret and practise Islam.

This book, therefore, stems from my professional interest in the region and a desire to contribute towards the literature that concerns the understanding of the dynamics between the Muslim and Christian communities in the Arabian Peninsula.

As my interest is primarily the interaction between religious communities, it is theology that I turn to when discerning beliefs which are manifest in the actions of the Islamic authorities (usually through the Ministry of Religious Affairs). As the next chapter on the literature review reveals, however, I cannot examine interfaith relations without reference to economic and political contexts. Therefore, this study will consider the impact of these factors on the experience of the Christian church. The literature suggests that Islamic theology, the discovery of oil along with its resulting economic rentier mentality and the influence of tribal culture, which is led by dominant ruling families, are all significant factors which impact the relationship between the resident Christian communities and the Islamic authorities. A simple model conceptualising these factors is set out here. In later chapters I refer to these three factors as trade, theology and tribalism.



The diagram highlights that the presence of the church in the Arabian Gulf is not an urgent or pressing issue for the Islamic authorities in those nations. This is partly because the church consists of migrant workers and is therefore excluded from political processes and because Gulf Arab nationals who choose to follow the Christian faith are very discrete in their observance, and therefore keep the presence of the church quiet. Instead, national agendas are dominated by economic concerns, developing and modernising infrastructures of state apparatus and confronting religious extremism within Islam.

Consequently, this means that Church-State relations are squeezed into the smaller spaces between the heavyweight concerns of tribalism, oil and Islam.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE ARABIAN GULF

The history of Christianity in the Gulf can be summarised in three stages. The first stage dates back to the early expansion of Christianity which sees the Church extend east towards Iraq and south into the Arabian Peninsula.³ The key evangelist would appear to be Saint Thomas who travelled to Babylon and then from there to India.⁴ The combination of trade and

³Trimingham, J.S. (1990). *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban. Bin Talal, H. (1998). *Christianity in the Arab World*. London: Arabesque Intl. Betts, R.B. (1975). *Christians in the Arab East*. Atlanta: John Knox Press. Moffett, S.H. (2009). *A History of Christianity in Asia. Vol 1*. New York: Orbis Books.

⁴Mingana, A. (1926). *The Early Spread of Christianity to India*. Manchester. Keay, F.E. (1951). *History of the Syrian Church in India*. Delhi: ISPCK. Kuriakose, M.K. (1982).

persecution seems to have provoked the movement of Christianity at this stage; thus the faith was adopted by particular tribes.

Meanwhile the church in Babylon (close to present-day Baghdad) established missionary dioceses, which eventually extended all the way to China. This was known formerly as the Assyrian Church of the East (sometimes described as Nestorian). Around the third century, the Church of the East established two dioceses in South East Arabia.⁵ The first diocese was called Beth Qatraye; it covered what are today the east coasts of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar. It was believed that the Bishop for Beth Qatraye was based in Bahrain. The second diocese was called Beth Mazunaye with a Bishop established in Sohar. This diocese covered modern-day Oman and an unknown area of what is now the United Arab Emirates. Archaeologists are rediscovering ancient monasteries buried in its sands which appear to have been built along an ancient trading route.⁶

These dioceses were not remote from their mother Church but contributed fully in the rich theological and liturgical development of Assyrian Christianity.⁷ Ancient documents such as the *Chronicle of Arbela*, the *Vita Iona*e and the *Chronicle of Seert*⁸ record the life of these ancient dioceses

History of Christianity in India: Source Materials. Madras: CLS. McBirnie, W.S. (1973). *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*. Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers.

⁵ Baumer, C. (2006). *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*. London: I.B. Tauris. Moffett, S.H. (2009). *A History of Christianity in Asia. Vol 1*. New York: Orbis Books. Jenkins, P. (2008). *The Lost History of Christianity*. Oxford: Lion Books. Parry, K. (ed.). (2010). *Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

⁶ Potts, D., Al Naboodah, H., & Hellyer, P. (eds.) (2003). *Archaeology in the United Arab Emirates*. London: Trident Press. Fares, S. (2011). "Christian Monasticism on the Eve of Islam: Kilwa (Saudi Arabia) – New Evidence". *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*. Vol 22: 243–252. Langfeldt, J.A. (1994). "Recently Discovered Early Christian Monuments in North-Eastern Arabia". *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*. Vol 5. pp. 32–60. Carter, R.A. (2008). "Christianity in the Gulf During the First Centuries of Islam". *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*. 19: 71–108. King, G.R.D. (1997). "A Nestorian Monastic Settlement on the Island of Sir Bani Yas, Abu Dhabi. A Preliminary Report". *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. Vol 60. Part 2. Hellyer, P. (1998). *Waves of Time: The Marine Heritage of the United Arab Emirates*. London: Trident Press.

⁷ Atiya, A.S. (2010). *History of Eastern Christianity*. New Jersey: Gorgias Press. Brock, S.P. (2000). "Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye". *ARAM* 11/12. Loosley, E. (2002). *A Historical Overview of the Arabian Gulf in the late Pre-Islamic Period: The Evidence for Christianity in the Gulf*. Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey.

⁸ Hellyer, P. (1998). *Waves of Time: The Marine Heritage of the United Arab Emirates*. London: Trident Press. Colless, B. (trans). (2008). *The Wisdom of the Pearlers. An Anthology of Syriac Christian Mysticism*. Michigan: Cistercian Publishers.

and shed light on, amongst various things, their daily routine of worship and regional disputes with their bishops.

The second stage of Christian history in the Gulf is marked by a silence in the archaeological and textual records from 900 AD until the seventeenth century, when European colonialism began to impact the region. The arrival of the Portuguese in particular has left its mark in the form of castles, forts and stories of brutal oppression.⁹ The struggle for the control of the Indian and Far Eastern trade routes was played out between the Portuguese, Dutch and British, with the Gulf Arabs closely watching as bystanders. Eventually the British prevailed and went on to establish treaties with the various ruling tribes around the Gulf. This British era was carefully documented in Lorimer's *Gazetteer*.¹⁰ Meanwhile the Roman Catholic Mission in the form of the Discalced Carmelite society was making its way overland into the north of the Arabian Gulf. By 1625 a monastery had been established in Basra, Iraq, and by the nineteenth century, Roman Catholic priests were regularly visiting Kuwait,¹¹ Bahrain, Oman, Yemen and Iran.¹² Yet, despite the presence of the Western colonial powers, there was no established church in the region as such. Christian ministers were usually passing through with no intention of settling in the region.

All this changed with the arrival of the Arabian Mission. Samuel Zwemer and James Cantine, two tenacious seminarians from the Reformed Church of America, led and inspired many Americans to come and serve, primarily through medical missions. Pioneer hospitals were set up in Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman.¹³ Their endeavours are faithfully recorded in the form

⁹ Heard-Bey, F. (2004). *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing. Hawley, D. (1970). *The Trucial States*. London: George Allen & Unwin. Al-Qasimi, S.M. (1988). *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf*. London: Routledge.

¹⁰ Lorimer, J.G. (1915). *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*. 4 Vols. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing.

¹¹ Sanmiguel, Mgr. V. (1970). *Christians in Kuwait*. Kuwait.

¹² Picucci, E. (2004). *The Apostolic Vicariate of Arabia*. Vatican.

¹³ Scudder, R.L. (1998). *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans. Harrison, P. (1940). *Doctor in Arabia*. New York: John Day Company. Mason, A.D., & Barny, F.J. (1926). *History of the Arabian Mission*. New York: RCA. Al-Sayegh, F. (1996). "American Missionaries in the UAE Region in the Twentieth Century". *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol 32. Boersma, J. (1991). *Grace in the Gulf*. Michigan: Eerdmans. Calverley, E.T. (1958). *My Arabian Days and Nights*. New York: Thomas. Y. Crowell Company. Clarke, A. (1993). *Through the Changing Scenes of Life, 1893–1993*. Bahrain: American Mission Hospital.

of letters and prayer bulletins, preserved in several volumes.¹⁴ Although a permanent mission presence was never established in Saudi Arabia or Qatar, missionaries visited and ministered within those two nations.¹⁵ Within the United Arab Emirates, other missionaries that were not allied with the Arabian Mission established hospitals in Sharjah¹⁶ and in Al Ain.¹⁷ The impact of the modern missionary movement in the Gulf region has not been fully assessed, though the Arabian Gulf is referred to in the studies of Missiology by Robert Woodberry,¹⁸ who proposed a controversial

¹⁴ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1988). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood.

¹⁵ Armerding, P. (2003). *Doctors for the Kingdom. The Work of the American Mission Hospitals in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. Michigan: Eerdmans. Allison, M.B. (1994). *Doctor Mary in Arabia*. Austin: University of Texas Press. Doumato, E.A. (2000). *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press. Gotting, F. (2006). *Healing Hands of Qatar*. Qatar: Self-published.

¹⁶ Thompson, A. (2011). *Christianity in the UAE: Culture and Heritage*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing.

¹⁷ Dyck, G. (1995). *The Oasis. Al Ain Memoirs of 'Dr Latifa'*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing.

¹⁸ Robert Woodberry (see Woodberry, R.D. (2004). *The Shadow of Empire: Christian Missions, Colonial Policy and Democracy in Post-Colonial Societies*. Unpublished Thesis: University of North Carolina. Woodberry, R.D. (2006) "Reclaiming the M-Word: The Legacy of Missions in Non-Western Societies". *Review of Faith and Internal Affairs*, 4(1): 3–12) examines the impact of Christian Missions on non-Western societies and concludes that 'when missionaries are independent from state controls (that is they can choose their own leaders and raise their own funds), they moderated, not exacerbated the negative effects of colonialism'. Woodberry also conducts a comprehensive economic survey and reaches the controversial conclusion that where Protestant Mission flourished, the economy and democratic reform was more likely to flourish. Certainly, we can see the influence of Missions in the field of education in provoking nationalist movements in Lebanon, Egypt and Syria and in the abolition of slavery in the region. In the Arabian Gulf, American missionaries were behind the construction of the first hospitals in the region, thus winning favour from the ruling families; however, the Gospel message of the missionaries, though communicated, was never embraced by the Gulf Arabs in any significant numbers.

However, Woodberry's theory does not really lend itself to explaining interfaith relations in the Gulf for the following reasons. Firstly, the activities of the missionary workers in the Gulf were under state control. The ruling families were involved in granting permissions on land and imposed restrictions on their activities. Secondly, democratic reform really never emerged in the Gulf with the possible exception of Kuwait, which has since regressed and its once promising parliamentary powers have been crippled by tribalism and corruption. Thirdly, although education was pioneered in the region, once the Gulf governments gained independence and started developing state infrastructure in the form of Ministries of Education, they swiftly enforced a conservative Islamic curriculum on students and removed expatriate teachers from defining the curriculum. Finally Woodberry's thesis detracts from

macro theory in which he argued that the political and economic fortunes of countries were profoundly influenced by Christian missions.

The current presence of the church in Oman, as well as in other countries in the Arabian Gulf, could be attributed to the goodwill generated by medical and educational care, which was provided by the missionaries at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, the presence and work of the missionaries would have required permission by the rulers and people of Oman in the first place. Does this mean, then, that the ancient code of tribal hospitality is the real reason for the church being allowed to exist in Oman today?

This book is an attempt to answer these questions, telling a little-known story of the church in Oman whilst also examining the Ibadi Islamic framework of religious freedom.

the considerable achievements of the local rulers whose own vision, commitments to cultural identity and political negotiations were instrumental in reaping benefits for their people.



CHAPTER 2

Studying the Arabian Context

Interfaith relations between Christians and Muslims have been described as one of the most urgent theological issues of the twenty-first century.¹ This research is being conducted against the backdrop of escalating sectarian violence in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain. Security threat levels are at a high in the West, and yet interfaith violence is not exclusively a Middle Eastern activity. Britain, Australia and the USA are just as likely to be breeding grounds for hostile religious attitudes and activities between Christians and Muslims as Syria.

Yet here in the Arabian Gulf, the salient aspect of life is that despite being in the heart of the Islamic world (geographically and economically), the first-time visitor from the West is struck by the *absence* of conflict. This is all the more unexpected given that the local Islamic population is often outnumbered by the expatriate community, comprised of substantial ethnic and religious minorities within the Arabian Gulf.² This raises many questions in my mind. How and why have some Arab Gulf countries managed

¹ Netland, H. (2001). *Encountering Religious Pluralism*. Leicester: Apollos. Published in August 2001, Netland's urgent appeal for interfaith activism was prescient in view of the calamitous events one month later.

² According to the US State Department Reports on Religious Freedom in 2013, the percentage of Christians living in the following countries was Bahrain 9%, Kuwait 16.6%, Oman 4%, Qatar 17.2%, Saudi Arabia 8% and the United Arab Emirates 9%. A conservative estimate is that there are almost three million Christians living in the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC). (www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm.wrapper).

to produce this state of societal harmony? Is this religious freedom? How much influence does Islam contribute to this state of pluralism? How do non-Muslim communities relate to the government? Who are the religious minorities in the Arabian Gulf?

I will be focusing on the experience of the Church in particular. Christianity is without exception the largest minority religion in each of these Gulf States and, apart from one nation in the Gulf, it is visible, flourishing and growing.

Historically, the relationship between Islamic authorities and the church has been moderated through the concept of ‘*dhimmitude*’.³ This is the name for a power relationship in which Christians are subservient to Muslims, but in return they are protected as a non-Muslim community. This was first manifested in the Covenant of Umar (I will be looking at this in more detail in a later chapter) and it involved a contractual understanding of economic, religious, marital and dress codes. Does *dhimmitude* still exist? How does it play out in the Arabian Gulf today?

During the Ottoman Empire, the millet system was introduced, in which non-Muslim groups living under Islamic law were granted autonomy to make decisions for their own communities. This allowed religious minorities to administrate not only their own rituals and doctrines but also civil issues such as marriage and divorce.

APPROACHES TO STUDYING ISLAMIC SOCIETIES

This literature review highlights the search for an approach to analyse and understand Islam and Christianity in the region.

The author starts by looking at general studies in the region on a variety of issues. The hope is that, by zooming in from a larger landscape to a specific issue, there will be a sense of what informs other researchers in terms of their theories and findings. Much of the traditional and emerging scholarly literature in the Arabian Gulf region tends to focus on geopolitical

³Ye’or, B. (1996). *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. Ye’or, B. (2013). *Understanding Dhimmitude*. New York: RVP Press.

issues including security,⁴ human trafficking⁵ and migrant labour⁶ and examining the impact of the hydrocarbon industry.⁷ The majority of these studies draw on hard measurable data and use quantitative research. However, the research on human trafficking mentioned earlier has had to utilise other methods. The data for human trafficking are more difficult to access due to its criminality and so the aforementioned studies rely more on qualitative methodologies. These methods help us to understand the victims' situations. Thus, the latter approach leads to insight, whereas statistics and processes are insufficient in telling the experiential story of a trafficked person. Tools such as interviews and documentary evidence (court and police records) have all contributed to the analysis of this particular issue. This seemed a helpful approach to studying the experience of Christians in the region, especially for countries where the church is not a particularly welcome guest. In contrast, other publications on the region were more limited in suggesting methodologies.

The scarcity of sources is revealed in a survey of Western literature written about the Arabian Gulf as a whole, which was summarised in a short chapter of eleven pages.⁸ Although the literature has grown since the 1980s, there is still very little on the topic of our interest for this research on modern Arabia.

⁴ Ulrichsen, K.C. (2011). *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*. London: Hurst & Company. Long, D.E. & Koch, C. (1997) *Gulf Security in the Twenty-First Century*. Abu Dhabi: Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research.

⁵ Kamrava, M. (2012a). *Migrant Labour in the Persian Gulf*. London: Hurst & Company. Kapiszewski, A. (2001). *Nationals and Expatriates: Population and Labour Dilemmas of the Gulf*. Dryden, NY: Ithaca Press.

⁶ Longva, A.N. (1999). *Walls Built on Sands: Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. Fox, J.W. et al. (2006). *Globalization in the Gulf*. London: Routledge.

⁷ ECSSR (2010). *Energy Security in the Gulf. Challenges and Prospects*. Abu Dhabi: Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research. Hertog, S. (2010) *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and State in Saudi Arabia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Anthony, J.D. (1975). *Arab States of the Lower Gulf: People, Politics, Petroleum*. Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute. Graham, H. (1978). *Arabian Time Machine: Self Portrait of an Oil State*. London: William Heinemann Ltd. Skeet, I. (1992). *Oman: Politics and Development*. London: Macmillan.

⁸ Netton, I.R. (1986). *Arabia and the Gulf: From Traditional Society to Modern States*. London: Croom Helm. Pages 43–54.

One exception is the work of Horner, who briefly surveyed the Christian presence in Arabia. At the beginning of the newly independent Arab states in the 1970s, Horner noted that the character of the expatriate church was markedly dominated by Christians from South India, the majority being Roman Catholic. The non-Catholic Indians formed Protestant groups known as ‘Malayalee’ (Malayalam-speaking) congregations. As numbers increased with further immigration from India, they divided into the communities of their origin, and in some cases, sent for Indian priests or pastors to serve on a full-time basis.⁹

A more recent survey of religious tolerance in Gulf countries conducted by Khasan, a Lebanese scholar, concludes that the Christian community is operating under unacceptable restrictions, which, in view of the global trading context that the Gulf States operate in, should be offensive to Western governments.¹⁰ The assumption that Khasan makes is that economic forces should inform the Islamic treatment of non-Muslim minorities. Clearly this is not the case, suggesting that an understanding of Islamic theology and its outworking through state mechanisms would be a place to start.

RELIGION IN ISLAMIC COUNTRIES

The author has highlighted that there is very little in the general English literature of the Gulf which specifically outlines the religious formation of Islam in those countries and, in particular, their relationships with the Christian community. The closest studies we are aware of, in which the relationship of the Christian community residing in an Islamic context is examined, are studies by Gabriel,¹¹ who analyses the Christian community and their interfaith relations with the Muslim communities in Pakistan and

⁹ Horner, N. (1978). “Present Day Christianity in the Gulf States of the Arabian Peninsula”. *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, no. 2: 53–63.

¹⁰ Khasan, H. (2016a). “Christianity’s Claim to the Birthplace of Islam”. *Stratfor Journal* 23/04/2016. Khasan, H. (2016b). “Religious Intolerance in the Gulf States”. *Middle East Quarterly* Summer 2016 Edition. Accessed on line 15 September 2016 at <http://www.meforum.org/6044/religious-intolerance-in-the-gulf-states>.

¹¹ Gabriel, T. (2007). *Christian Citizens in an Islamic State. The Pakistan Experience*. Aldershot: Ashgate. Gabriel, T. (1996). *Christian-Muslim Relations in Sarawak, East Malaysia*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing House.

in Sarawak; by Van Gorder,¹² who focuses on Persian Christianity and interprets their experience in the context of international relations; and a historical survey by Griffith,¹³ who investigates primarily the Levantine Christian communities. These studies draw heavily on written historical and contemporary sources and use sociological concepts for their theoretical and analytical components of research.

In terms of studies of Christianity in the Middle East and their relationships with the Islamic authorities, the best-known ones are Cragg,¹⁴ Griffith¹⁵ and Betts,¹⁶ all of which focus on the historical native Arab Christian communities in Egypt and the Levant, with scarce reference to the Arabian Gulf. The one exception is Trimingham¹⁷ in his magisterial *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Arabia*, which among other things highlights the tribal influence upon the movement of religion. Other general surveys focusing on interfaith relations include Goddard¹⁸ in his *History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Within these wide-ranging historical narratives of Christian-Muslim encounters, conflict is often featured. The mentioned writings highlight and explore the role of religion in these historical conflicts.

One fascinating study examined the impact of Wahhabi theology on gender roles, comparing and contrasting the role of women in Saudi Arabia with that of women in the other Gulf States.¹⁹ This drew on a variety of methodologies including historical sources, observations and interviews in order to assess the impact of Islamic theology on day-to-day living.

¹² Van Gorder, A.C. (2010). *Christianity in Persia and the Status of Non-Muslims in Iran*. New York: Lexington Books.

¹³ Griffith, S.H. (2008). *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁴ Cragg, K. (1991). *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*. Westminster: John Knox Press.

¹⁵ Griffith, S.H. (2008). *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁶ Betts, R.B. (1975). *Christians in the Arab East*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.

¹⁷ Trimingham, J.S. (1990). *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban.

¹⁸ Goddard, H. (2000). *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Chicago: New Amsterdam Books.

¹⁹ Doumato, E.A. (2000). *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press.

WEBER

In contrast to the view that religion was held captive to the prevailing economic structures in society, Weber, in his classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,²⁰ sought to demonstrate how religion shaped the economy. Weber is particularly relevant to this study as he is the first sociologist to seriously engage with analysing Islam. In particular, Weber sought to understand Islam within the local economic climate.

Thus, as concluded by Husain,²¹ a necessary religious condition which allows capitalism to prosper is a 'world ascetic ethic'.²² Asceticism and capitalism do seem to be paradoxical concepts, yet the Weberian approach argued that the two were entwined, that religious beliefs determine the mode of economy. The capitalist model requires a disciplined ethic in which gratification for success was delayed through investment back into the economic enterprise. Financial success was seen as a mark of God's favour. Weber attempted to test his hypothesis by going on a cross-cultural tour that included India, China and the Islamic world, in particular the Middle East. He concluded that the Eastern religions did not have the prerequisite conditions to foster capitalism. With regard to Islam, Weber identified the salient features as paternalistic tribalism with a militaristic ethos and an economy which can be compared with feudalism. Riches were acquired more often than not through raids and invasions. Husain concludes: 'Islam appeared to Weber in a purely hedonistic spirit, especially towards women, luxuries and properties.'²³

The emergence of Islamic empires, according to Weberian analysis also failed to produce a laissez-faire market, due to the heavy dependence of dynastic rulers upon fickle military powers and religious scholars (*ulama*). The consequence is a historical trail of dynastic rebellions, in which the main benefactors were landowners and merchants. They were frequently courted by the sultans in a dance in which the ruling party bargains with enabled merchants and landowners to retain their wealth in exchange for their loyalty to the throne. All of this meant that the main institutions in society were not geared towards allowing free enterprise or encouraging mass production requiring large labour populations.

²⁰ Weber, M. (1930). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge.

²¹ Husain, S.A. (2003). "Modernism, Secularism and Islam: A Discourse on Mutuality and Compatibility". *The New Age*. Dhaka Daily, Bangladesh. 7 June 2003.

²² Ibid., page 53.

²³ Ibid., page 1.

Other applications of Weberian theory relate to his three typologies of authority. One author argues that the role of the ‘ulama, the clerics who define and apply Islamic law are “technicians of the routine cults”²⁴ and embody all three forms of authority outlined by Weber as traditional, charismatic and legal rational. This marks the role of Islamic leaders in a Muslim society as a ‘collective actor’²⁵ with significant influence.

Can we apply Weberian analysis to the study of Islam in the Gulf?

The answer to this question would seem to be a cautious ‘yes’, but it would have to take into account the following criticisms.

Weber’s understanding of Islam has been critiqued by a variety of authors. His earliest detractor was Becker,²⁶ who showed ‘that it was mistaken to see Islam as being totally hostile to economic activity’.²⁷ Other critics include Said,²⁸ who saw Weber as heavily influenced by orientalist scholarship, that is, subscribing to a dichotomous worldview which promoted ontological differences between the East and the West. In contrast, Watt²⁹ and Arnold³⁰ paint a very different picture of Islamic expansionism, being primarily a result of trade and peaceful preaching rather than conquest. This latter point of view is supported by Von Grunebaum’s³¹ scholarship, which highlighted the prevalence of economic terminology in the Holy Qur’an, thus promoting a religion which is comfortable with the world of commerce. The reality is probably somewhere in between these two extreme views.

Despite these critiques, Weber’s theory and approach towards Islam continued to appear in further studies. For example, we can clearly see Weber’s influence on Clifford Geertz’s classic comparative study between the Islamic societies of Indonesia and Morocco.³²

²⁴ Mouline, N. (2014). *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. Page 2.

²⁵ Ibid., page 2.

²⁶ Becker, C.H. (1924). *Islamstudien. Vom Werden und Wesen der islamischen Welt*. Leipzig.

²⁷ Translated by Endress, G. (2002). *Islam: An Historical Introduction. Second Edition*. Edinburgh: The New Edinburgh Islamic Surveys. Edinburgh University Press.

²⁸ Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

²⁹ Watt, W.M. (1983). *Islam and Christianity Today: A Contribution to Dialogue*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

³⁰ Arnold, T.W. (1965). *The Preaching of Islam*. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf.

³¹ Von Grunebaum, G.E. (1970). *Classical Islam. A History, 600–1258*. London: Barnes & Noble.

³² Geertz, C. (1968). *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

GEERTZ

One difference between Weber's approach and Geertz's is that the latter sought to use the anthropological method of 'thick description' as a means of understanding the subject society from an insider point of view whereas Weber was very much the outside observer, looking upon Islam from a Western perspective.

The work of Geertz caught my attention particularly because of its compare-and-contrast approach between Indonesia and Morocco. His method is one that I was interested in applying to this research, when I was originally exploring looking at Qatar and Oman as my comparative subject countries.

Geertz highlights how the different histories and formations of Islam in each country shape the institutions and ethos of society. Through this fieldwork as a participant observer, he was able to pick up on some distinctive manifestations of the Islamic faith that he had directly encountered. In addition to this he surveyed historical sources and questioned his subjects through the use of open interviews.

His study also draws attention to the economic environment and how it shaped the Islamic identity in two very different parts of the world: Morocco and Indonesia. This study provokes me therefore to pay careful attention to the emergence of Islam in Oman, as well as the distinctive social institutions which arose as a consequence and the evolution of Islam in Oman in terms of theology and practice. This requires a historical awareness and the use of 'thick description'.

More recent anthropological studies, particularly from Oman, highlight the impact of economic factors upon Muslim communities. The impact of the discovery of oil upon an Omani village is discussed by Eickelman,³³ who in his anthropological research highlights the massive shift in expectations and lifestyle in the ordinary Omani villager. A similar study by his wife³⁴ also highlights the impact of oil from the perspective of Omani women. This anthropological body of research has been expanded and brought up to date by the work of Limbert,³⁵ who also analyses the impact of oil on the identity and religion of Omani women.

³³Eickelman, D. (1983). "Omani Village: The Meaning of Oil." In *The Politics of Middle Eastern Oil*, Peterson, J.E. (ed). Washington, DC: Middle East Institute.

³⁴Eickelman, C. (1984). *Women and Community in Oman*. New York: New York University Press.

³⁵Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

OTHER APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF ISLAMIC SOCIETIES

Since Geertz's seminal study, there has been an explosion of sociological and anthropological studies examining Islamic cultures.³⁶ These broaden the study of Islam from its religious and economic settings and examine other significant factors, including cultural institutions and tribalism.

These studies have been conducted across the Islamic world, including Africa,³⁷ Europe³⁸ and Asia.³⁹ The majority of these studies are rooted in the anthropological discipline in which the researcher immerses themselves in the subject culture and attempts to understand their religion from an insider perspective, with varying degrees of success. All these studies highlight the central role that religion and religious ritual plays in shaping society, especially in Islamic societies. Theories offered by anthropologists as a tool for understanding Muslim communities range from the 'Islam is a blueprint of the social order' thesis of Gellner⁴⁰ and the comparative, symbolic and performative approaches of Geertz⁴¹ to Abdul Hamid El-Zein's⁴² 'Many Islams' and Gilsenan's⁴³ more provocative idea that Islam is everywhere that Muslims say it is.⁴⁴

³⁶Dupret, B., et al. (2012). *Ethnographies of Islam: Ritual Performances and Everyday Practices*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

³⁷Seck, M. (2012). *Narratives as Muslim Practice in Senegal*. New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers. Holy, L. (1991). *Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society. The Berti of Sudan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁸Nielsen, J. (1995). *Muslims in Western Europe*. Edinburgh University Press. 2nd Edition. Lewis, B. & Schnapper, D. (1994). *Muslims in Europe*. London: Pinter Publishers. Lewis, P. (1994). *Islamic Britain*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers. Geaves, R. (1996). *Sectarian Influences within Islam in Britain: With References to the Concepts of 'ummah' and 'community'*. Leeds: Monograph Series in Community and Religion.

³⁹Esposito, J.L., Voll, J.O. & Bakar, O. (2008). *Asian Islam in the 21st Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁰Gellner, E. (1981). *Muslim Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴¹Geertz, C. (1968). *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴²El-Zein, A.H. (1977). "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam". *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6: 227–254.

⁴³Gilsenan, M. (1982). *Recognising Islam: Religion and Society*. London: I.B. Tauris.

⁴⁴Hirji, Z. (2010). *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam. Historical and Contemporary Discourse Amongst Muslims*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers. Page 12.

TRIBAL INFLUENCES

The role of tribalism as an influence on cultural identity and religion is still an understudied area, with Al-Zoby et al. insisting that this is the core social structure on which everything else is built upon in the Arab Gulf States. Thus, the tribal families are ‘the oldest surviving organizational institution in the Gulf’ and it is insisted that ‘compliance with unwritten tribal rules and customs is still recurrent even at present times and equals to the prevailing rule in the GCC’.⁴⁵

Gellner’s⁴⁶ work in particular is pertinent due to the fact that he explores the interplay between tribes and rulers, and his introductory long essay attempts to fuse the theories of David Hume and Ibn Khaldun.⁴⁷ The sociological concept of a ‘segmented’ society in which a small minority exerts control over the majority is used by Gellner to describe Islamic tribal society. He explores how religion and its rituals are used to legitimise power; Morocco, in particular, is used as a case study. The best description of a segmented society in an Arab context is provided by Evans-Pritchard who writes as follows:

Each section of a tribe, from the smallest to the largest, has its Shaikh or Shaikhs. The tribal system, typical of segmentary structures everywhere, is a system of balanced opposition between tribes and tribal sections from the largest to the smallest divisions, and there cannot therefore be any single authority in a tribe. Authority is distributed at every point of the tribal structure and political leadership is limited to situations in which a tribe or a segment of the tribe of it acts corporately. ... There cannot, obviously, be any absolute authority vested in a single Shaikh of a tribe when the fundamental principle of tribal structure is opposition between its segments, and in such segmentary systems there is no state and no government as we understand these institutions.⁴⁸

As Oman is described as tribal in origins and make up, the latter comment is revealing and raises the question as to ‘how, in view of the segmentalism of tribal structure, did one ruling family come to predomi-

⁴⁵ Al-Zoby, M.A. & Baskan, B. (eds). (2014). *State-Society Relations in the Arab Gulf States*. Berlin: Gerlach Press. Page 142.

⁴⁶ Gellner, E. (1981). *Muslim Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁷ Ibn Khaldun (ed). Dawood N.J. (Trans) Rosenthal, F. (2015). *Al Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁴⁸ Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1949). *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page 31.

nate over a society which in theory would never allow such a thing to happen?’ It is argued that rentier state theory provides a possible explanation of how a tribal, segmented society could morph into a state with a central government, dominated by a single ruling family. This is something I will discuss further in the final chapter of the book.

THE INFLUENCE OF RULING FAMILIES

The power of the ruling families is therefore a critical issue. A study by Herb⁴⁹ examines the role of the ruling family and how they relate to state mechanisms. He concludes that the oil economy has introduced a new dynamic into the Gulf States. Prior to the oil economies, he argues that the ruling families were in a precarious position and subject to rapidly changing tides of allegiances, usually from within their own family or from the merchant families who used their financial clout in return for political favours from them. With the rapid development of state structures, alongside the revenues generated by the oil industry, the threat from merchant families diminished considerably and the rulers maintained stability within their own ranks by placing family members in key ministerial positions in the emerging state structures. This also diminished the threat from within the family and consolidated the tribal interest in maintaining the status quo. Herb, however, seems to downplay the historical mechanisms by which the ruling family draws upon tradition to maintain its power, including cultural and religious sources of authority. He admits that rentier wealth on its own does not create stability, referring to Libya as a case in point.⁵⁰ He argues that Libya’s ruling family lost control because it did not integrate family members into the state structures and, essentially, the family squandered any meaningful platforms for interacting with the wider society.

Linz’s work on authoritarian regimes seems to be directly applicable to Oman and other Gulf monarchies. For example, Linz’s definition of the prototypical authoritarian system postulates the following:

The personalistic and particularistic use of power for essentially private ends of the ruler and his collaborators makes the country like a huge domain. ... The boundaries between the public treasury and the private wealth of the

⁴⁹ Herb, M. (1999). *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*. New York: State University of New York Press.

⁵⁰ Ibid., page 253.

ruler become blurred. He and his collaborators, with his consent, take appropriate public funds freely, establish public oriented monopolies, and demand gifts and pay-offs from business for which no public accounting is given.⁵¹

In such an economy, the power of the ruling families is formidable. Even though Gulf societies become more bureaucratically mature with the emergence of state institutions and government ministries, these are still often led by members of the ruling families or trusted associates. This restricts the dynamics of social class-based activism.

Another useful discussion is Khuri's work *Imams and Emirs*.⁵² He argues that what separates mainstream Sunni Islam, both economically and politically, from the smaller sectarian schools is that the Sunnis tended to dominate centres of trade and were better placed for establishing macro infrastructure for governance because their tradition was established by virtue of being a majority. In contrast, the sectarian groups tended to be more provincial in their origins and centres of influence, defining their theology in opposition to the mainstream Sunni or governing authorities. Economically, the smaller sectarian communities tended to be gathered around agrarian or village cottage industries. Although he refers to the Omani Ibadi tradition repeatedly in his text, Khuri does not really explain the anomaly (according to his theory) of how Ibadism, as a minority Islamic sect, became the main Islam for the nation. The real value of his work, however, is the understanding of how Islamic theology shapes the fragmented character of Arab tribal society. This is in contrast to rentier state theory, which implies that the religion is subject to the forces of the local economy.

TECHNOLOGY

The emergence of new technologies and the global market is the theme of Green's work in which he examines the interchange of religious ideas in *Terrains of Exchange*.⁵³ He describes religious groups as 'firms' who follow strategy and intentionality in their travel and exchange of technology,

⁵¹ Ibid., page 152.

⁵² Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books.

⁵³ Green, N. (2014). *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

often with the purpose of propagating their faith. In particular, he looks at the development of the printing press and its early use by the Evangelical movement rooted in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge which sought to flood Muslim lands with their ideas. Green catalogues how Muslims in turn appropriated the same technology and concepts of Christians and fought back using printing technology to reinforce their own message. Underlying this movement were governments seeking to understand and deploy this new technology for their own agenda, that of furthering trade and boosting their knowledge economy.

OTHER LITERATURE SPECIFICALLY ON OMAN

Literature referring to Oman will be highlighted in the chapters ahead. However, in the English language, Ibadi Islam is becoming better documented. One of the earliest records made available in English was Razik's⁵⁴ historical overview. This historical magnum opus, however, focused more on intertribal relationships rather than interfaith relationships. There are fleeting references to battles and conflicts with the Portuguese 'Christian' forces, but that is the sum of it.

An apologetics approach (a defensive one) to the origins of Ibadism is provided by Mu'ammam.⁵⁵ This text is aimed largely at other Muslim readers who may hold a disparaging view of Ibadism. The overall effect is one of self-aggrandisement as Mu'ammam aggressively asserts the historical primacy of the school of Ibadism over the other Islamic schools of jurisprudence.

The leading expert on Ibadi history and theology in the English language is the Oxford scholar, Wilkinson.⁵⁶ Much of his work is focused on tribal history and conflict, but although he goes into considerable depth into the Ibadi religion, it is again from a historical and evolutionary perspective and he does not really engage with the question of Omani interaction with people of other faiths in light of their theology.

Gaiser sets out the development of Ibadi Islam in four stages, which are secrecy (*al kitman*), manifestation (*al-zuhur*), defence (*al difa'*) and the

⁵⁴ Razik, S. (1871). *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman* (Trans. Badger, G.P. 1986). London: Darf Publishers.

⁵⁵ Mu'ammam, A.Y. (2007). *Ibadism in History: Volume 1: The Emergence of the Ibadi School*. Muscat: Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

⁵⁶ Wilkinson, J.C. (1987). *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*. Cambridge: CUP. Wilkinson, J.C. (2010). *Ibadism: Origins and Early Development in Oman*. Oxford: OUP.

giving of oneself to Allah—to fight for Islam (*al shira*).⁵⁷ These formational stages of the Imamate are shaped by intra-religious forces in which the Sunnis and Shias despised and persecuted those of the Ibadi school. A question raised by Gaiser's work is 'which stage of the Imamate allows space and priority for interfaith relations?' This is a question worth exploring, especially with regard to interactions with the Christian communities.

The main study on Omani-Christian relations from a Christian perspective is written by Rev. Ray Skinner, a former Anglican Chaplain based in Muscat. Skinner's study⁵⁸ reviews Christian-Muslim relations in Oman. He presents a somewhat rosy picture (in the sense that he emphasises only the positive encounters) of a people whose practice of Islam is perceived to predispose them to warm relations with non-Muslims. However, the bulk of his text dwells on theological issues that are covered by other authors. His work, produced in 1994, is now 25 years old, and since that time no other book exists that has attempted to cover the same area.

A lot of literature written about Oman comes from travellers, missionaries, diplomats and soldiers.⁵⁹ Some of these are written from a particular cultural (orientalist) perspective and their insights are coloured by their colonial agendas and assumptions.

When it comes to Islamic theology, the majority of the commentaries (*tafsir*) remain in Arabic. A survey of the formation of Ibadi Islamic theology is presented by Ennami⁶⁰ and a compilation bibliography of Ibadism can be found in Custers' seminal offering.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Gaiser, A.R. (2010). *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers. The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibadi Imamate Traditions*. Oxford: OUP. Pages 10–11.

⁵⁸ Skinner, R.F. (1992). *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press. The author was Anglican Chaplain in Oman during the late 1980s. This book is his Master's degree thesis.

⁵⁹ Examples include Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman Since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Innes, N.M. (1987). *Minister in Oman*. Cambridge: Oleander Press Ltd. Skeet, I. (1992). *Oman: Politics and Development*. London: Macmillan. Alston, R. & Laing, S. (2012). *Unshook Till the End of Time. A History of Relations Between Britain & Oman 1650–1970*. London: Gilgamesh Publishing. Mann, M. (1994). *Trucial Oman Scouts: Story of a Bedouin Force*. London: Michael Russell Publishing Ltd. Cawston, A. & Curtis, M. (2010). *Arabian Days: Memoirs of Two Trucial Oman Scouts*. London: Michael Curtis Publishers.

⁶⁰ Ennami, A.K. (2008). *Studies in Ibadhism*. Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

⁶¹ Custers, M.H. (2008). *Al-Ibadiya. A Bibliography. Volume 1. Ibadis of the Mashriq*. Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

CONCLUSION OF LITERATURE REVIEW

What is clear from the literature review is that it highlights the economic factor as the predominant concern of scholars, which is also perceived to shape Islamic relations with the religious ‘other’. As one scholar said, ‘[i]t is an eternal truth that a country’s political direction is driven by the state of its finances.’⁶² The access and control of monetary sources gives more choice for how rentier states develop socially and politically, especially in international policy.

However, all these factors need to be accommodated within a religious framework, in which the rulers of the Gulf seek to validate and legitimise their decisions as permissible under divine writ. Thus, the prevailing Islamic theologies enable a historical and contextual response to geopolitical realities, whilst at the same time providing a bedrock from which to guard conservative religious sensibility. To understand and support this view, an examination of the theological discourse from Oman is essential; this is because the ruling families and the leading personalities play a huge part in shaping the destiny of their nations, not least because their power is ‘real power’. Oman’s monarchical political structure, for example, has been described as ‘authoritarian’.⁶³

In the light of this literature review, we now need to ask the question as to ‘which methodology will best apply to understanding the relationship between the Christian communities in Oman and their hosts’. Weber and Geertz highlight the importance of understanding the historical economic context of Islam in order to analyse contemporary religious and cultural behaviour.

This calls for a careful examination of the historical context of the arrival of Islam in Oman and a search for events and encounters between the Muslim and Christian communities, which may reveal underlying theological constructs which inform such encounters. In a later chapter in this book we will look at the role of Ibadi theology in shaping Omani response to Christianity.

⁶² Beasant, J. (2013). *Oman: The True Life Drama and Intrigue of an Arab State*. Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing. Page 241.

⁶³ Kamrava, M. (2013). *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*. London: Cornell University Press.



Beginnings: The Early Church

Does religious freedom in Oman have a historical precedent? What has been the experience of the early church in Oman with regard to relating to their non-Christian neighbours? What are the origins of the Church in Oman? These are some of the questions this chapter attempts to explore.

In my introduction, I highlight the three major influences on the Christian presence in the Arabian Gulf, namely Tribe, Trade and Theology (the *Three Ts*). This chapter highlights one more factor which led to the Church's arrival in the Gulf and that is terror resulting from persecution. All these factors seem to have played a role in the arrival and formation of the early church in Oman.

That the early church was so structured and visible in the form of buildings and officials and, as we see later on, even a theological seminary, all points to a climate of tolerance. This seems to continue during the rise of Islam, and after a couple of hundred years, the Christian presence seems to fizzle out, thus pointing to a prevailing and dominant Islam which simply smothered the increasingly diminishing Church for reasons outlined here.

Before we examine the interaction between Islam and Christianity in modern-day Oman, we will analyse the pre-Islamic presence of the church in the region, particularly looking for the influence of the *Three Ts*.

The presence of the Church in the south-eastern region of the Gulf is still relatively unknown, as there is little written about it. An early reference to the Church is found in the writings of one of the great pre-Islamic poets, Labid, who was born in the sixth century. Labid was a contemporary

of the Prophet Mohammed and eventually converted to Islam. He wrote an account of his travels down the east coast of Arabia. As he approached settlements, he described the beating of the church clappers, calling inhabitants to worship.¹ The churches at that time used wooden clappers instead of bells to signal the start of divine services. So, who were these Christians in the Arabian Gulf?

In Oman there is very little information about pre-Islamic history in either their school textbooks² or in their museums.³ The politics of archaeology has meant that discoveries of pre-Islamic Christian church buildings in Arabian Gulf countries usually result in the findings being discreetly shelved or, as in the case of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, literally being covered up again with sand. The exception to this has been the monasteries found in Failaka Island off Kuwait and the Sir Bani Yas island monastery off the coast of Abu Dhabi. The response of Gulf Arab governments to these archaeological remains is in itself informative, perhaps revealing their real attitudes towards non-Muslim communities both in the present and the past.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The remains of these ancient churches in Arabia have only recently come to light. In 1986, a church building was discovered in the sands near Jubail in eastern Saudi Arabia.⁴ Other churches were found at Failaka Island,⁵ Akkaz (Kuwait),⁶ Tarut, Jebel Berri, Thaj⁷ and on the islands of

¹Trimingham, J.S. (1990). *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban. Page 282.

²Groiss, A. (Trans). (2003). *The West, Christians and Jews in Saudi Arabian Schoolbooks*. New York: American Jewish Committee. Al-Farsi, S. (2013). *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman*. London: I.B. Tauris.

³The author of this research has visited museums in Qatar and Oman and whilst there are references to earlier pre-Islamic civilisations in the region there is no reference to pre-Islamic Christian presence.

⁴Langfeldt, J.A. (1994). "Recently Discovered Early Christian Monuments in North-eastern Arabia". *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*. Vol 5, pp. 32–60.

⁵Bernard, V. & Salles, J.F. (1991). "Discovery of a Christian Church at Al-Qusur, Failaka (Kuwait)". *Seminar for Arabian Studies*. Vol. 21.

⁶Baumer, C. (2006). *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*. London: I.B. Tauris.

⁷Carter, R.A. (2008). "Christianity in the Gulf during the first Centuries of Islam". *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*. 19:71–108.

Marawah and Sir Bani Yas off the coast of Abu Dhabi.⁸ Reference to these ancient churches can be located in early texts such as the *Chronicle of Arbela* and the *Vita Ioniae*, ‘a work describing the life of a monk who flourished in the middle of the 4th century’.⁹ Among other things, this document mentions the existence of a monastery south of Beth Qatraye, the modern-day eastern province of Saudi Arabia, or on the black island (identified tentatively as Sir Bani Yas island), and for this reason is identified to be somewhere amongst the islands of Abu Dhabi.¹⁰ Another old document is known as the *Chronicle of Seert*. Peter Hellyer, former Project Director of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, summarises the contents of this text, which was believed to have been composed sometime after 1036 AD:

*There we read of Abdisho who is known to have founded numerous monasteries in the reign of catholicos Tomarsa. Abdisho, we are told went to an island of Yamama and Bahrain ... where he baptised the inhabitants and founded a monastery. Although this particular island is believed to be located further North in the Gulf.*¹¹

This text reveals the active missionary presence of the Church of the East all over the Gulf.

In 1992, a Christian monastery was discovered by an archaeological expedition during excavations on a remote island off the coast of Abu Dhabi. Building layouts and even the structure of living quarters are very similar amongst the early monasteries throughout the Gulf, suggesting a shared communal source and identity. This site on Sir Bani Yas, located on the east of the island, is thought to have been built by the Church there at the end of the sixth century, which was part of the Diocese called Beth Qatraye.

It is believed that the monastery was abandoned in AD 750, leaving behind ‘precious artefacts that have been excavated, including more than

⁸ King, G.R.D. (1997). “A Nestorian Monastic Settlement on the island of Sir Bani Yas, Abu Dhabi. A Preliminary Report”. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. Vol 60. Part 2. Potts, D. Al Naboodah, H. & Hellyer, P. (eds) (2003). *Archaeology in the United Arab Emirates*. London: Trident Press.

⁹ Hellyer, P. (2001). “Nestorian Christianity in the Pre-Islamic UAE and Southeastern Arabia”. *Journal of Social Affairs*. Vol 188. No. 72. Page 68.

¹⁰ Ibid., page 64.

¹¹ Ibid., page 65.

fifteen types of pottery, glass vessels, and ceremonial vases and richly decorated elaborate plasterwork stucco'.¹²

It is thought to be one of the first functioning monasteries ever built in the world.¹³ The occupants of the monastic settlement are believed to have been a small, well-organised community of twenty monks, living in regular square rooms inside the enclosure, all surrounding the church. Typically, an Eastern monastery would have had a high wall around the outside, lined with rooms on the inner wall with an open courtyard in the middle. The Sir Bani Yas¹⁴ church is a

*basilica type and at four metres high was the tallest building in the enclosure. The entire monastery appears to have been built around the grave of an unknown man who may well have been a local saint or the founder of the monastery. His importance is indicated by the fact that his grave is right down the middle of the church on the north-south axis, which meant he was directly opposite the altar where communion was held. The idea being that on the day of Christ's return he will be resurrected and when he stands up, he will be facing his church. This is a common feature of Nestorian Christian churches.*¹⁵

Peter Hellyer described the moment when the team began to realise what they had found. They became suspicious that the site was not a typical village because everything was so ordered. Everything was facing the same way (which implied a liturgical significance) and it was very clean. In 1994, a stucco cross was found and the team knew it was a major

¹²From an article in Abu Dhabi Week magazine, 16–22 December 2010, p. 9.

¹³In a recent paper, Elders and Hellyer note the striking similarity between the monastery discovered at Sir Bani Yas and a seventh-century English monastery located in Wearmouth-Jarrow in northeast England. They conclude that the monastic movement was even more widespread than previously realised. A gift of pepper bequeathed by the famous Venerable Bede indicated that links between the English Church and the Church of the East was quite plausible, given that the pepper and spice trade route from India was marked by the Nestorian monasteries.

¹⁴On a recent trip to the Sir Bani Yas Island, I was travelling with a Syrian Orthodox Bishop who alerted me to the Christian Syriac origins of the names of places in the Gulf. For example, Qatar is a Syriac word meaning 'place of smoke', which may either refer to the burning oil pits which were exposed on the surface of the desert or to the practice of burning incense in the church's rituals. Sir Bani Yas itself is Syriac meaning 'community of the children of St Elijah', Yas being the conflated version of Elias or Elijah. While Elijah is an honoured prophet in Islam, he is a popular subject in early church iconography.

¹⁵Interview with Dr. Joseph Elders, *Khaleej Times*, 18 December 2010.

international discovery, as they had found the only physical evidence of Christianity in the southern Gulf from the pre-Islamic era.

Dr. Joseph Elders, the Archaeology Officer for the Church of England, argued that the location of the church reflected an intentional strategy of the Church. He said:

This monastery was almost certainly planted. It was put there deliberately as a political and religious act. They wanted to use it as a base for trade and for taking Christianity to India and China, and also obviously to spread Christianity around the region.¹⁶

Elders concluded that

*[t]he evangelisation of the Arabian Gulf islands and coastline by the Church of the East appears to have followed the maritime trade routes between India and Arabia. Through following this route, some missionaries even reached China as evidenced by the discovery of a tablet in Sian with an inscription in Chinese and Syriac (the ecclesiastical language of the Church of the East) referring to the foundation there of a monastery in the year 638 AD.*¹⁷

We are now going to look at the early history of the church in the specific region which will be the focus of our study, Oman.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH OF THE EAST IN THE GULF

The Church of the East on the Arabian side of the Gulf was divided into two separate jurisdictions, with Beth Qatraye and the Maritime Islands forming the more westerly area, with Beth Mazunaye to the east. The former encompassed Bahrain, Darin, Al Khatt and Al Hasa. The Qatar peninsula became part of this as well. The eastern part of the Church was administered from Sohar.

The diocese of Mazun stretched from the Strait of Hormuz down to Salalah and reached west along the coast into what is now the United Arab Emirates. We are not sure where the boundaries were between Beth Qatraye

¹⁶ Hellyer (2001). Ibid. Page 70.

¹⁷ Hellyer, P. (1998). *Waves of Time: The Marine Heritage of the United Arab Emirates*. London: Trident Press. Page 67.

and Mazunaye. 'It is claimed that the name Mazun is the Persian name for Oman which was ruled by the Persians.'¹⁸

Both these jurisdictions came under the authority and control of the metropolitan bishop based in Rec-Ardashir, a part of the Fars Catholicate (a province in the south of Persia), who was in turn appointed by the patriarch of the Church of the East who was based in Seleucia-Ctesiphon (south of what is now Baghdad). This arrangement of having a Persian-based metropolitan later proved to be divisive, as the Syriac-speaking Christians on the southern side of the Gulf naturally looked to their 'mother' church in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, which still embodied their language and culture.¹⁹

What is clear is that Beth Qatrave was by far the bigger diocese and records several bishops operating under the authority of the Metropolitan of Fars who was based at Rev-Ardashir. He is listed as being 'sixth in matters of Metropolitan precedence and his jurisdiction included both sides of the Gulf',²⁰ whereas the Beth Mazunaye records seem to reveal a single bishopric operating out of what is now known as Sohar.

Over in Beth Qatrave, the suffering of the Arab Himyarite Christians was known and recorded, and in the third century the Yemeni districts of Najran and Al Yamama became part of the Archdiocese of Qatar.²¹

By the sixth century, Byzantine and Syriac ecclesiastical records reveal that there were five *sees* (bishoprics) on the western side of the Gulf. Qatar was one of the five and provided oversight to churches in the whole peninsula. The other sees included the regions of Bahrain and the eastern seaboard of Arabia. The AD 676 Church Council records the presence of several bishops who came from Bahrain and Sohar. Churches were recorded in Hatta, Darin (now known as Tarut Island), Muharraq (site of Bahrain's airport) and Oman, which included the present-day United Arab Emirates. These bishops were George, Catholicos and Patriarch of

¹⁸ Smith, G.R., et al. (1997). *New Arabian Studies Vol 4*. Exeter: Exeter University Press. Page 217.

¹⁹ Hellyer, P. (2001). "Nestorian Christianity in the Pre-Islamic UAE and Southeastern Arabia". *Journal of Social Affairs*. Vol 188. No. 72. Page 91. Hunter, E.C.D. (ed). (2009). *The Christian Heritage of Iraq: Collected Papers from the Christianity of Iraq I-V Seminar Days*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press. Page 3.

²⁰ Healey, J.F. (2000). "The Christians of Qatar" found in Netton, I.R. (2000). *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth. Vol 1*. Leiden: Leiden University Press. Page 224.

²¹ Winkler, D.W. (2007). *Syriac Churches Encountering Islam. Past Experiences and Future Perspectives*. New Jersey: Gorgias Press. Page 49.

the East; Thomas, the Metropolitan Bishop of Beth Qatraye; Isho'yahb the Bishop of Darin; Sergius, the Bishop of Trihan; Stephanus, the Bishop of the Mazunaye; other bishops from Arabia included Pousai (Al Hasa) and Sahin (Hatta). Clearly, the Nestorian church was a well-established and widespread organisation. This synod removes the temptation to dismiss this far-flung diocese of the Church of the East as a marginalised wing of the early Church.

THEOLOGIAN OF THE EARLY CHURCH IN THE ARABIAN GULF

In fact, 'this province on the fringes of society' produced many leading theologians and scholars, who impacted the wider Church with their learning and writings.²² Of these, the most influential was St Isaac of Nineveh. The little that is known about him is drawn from two early sources. Both these sources reveal that St Isaac was born in Beth Qatraye. In her summary of Gulf Christianity, Emma Loosley writes as follows:

*To place his life in context it must be pointed out that he was a monk during the time of the Bet Qatraye rebellion against Catholicos Isho Yahv III and a Syrian writer says that when Catholicos George visited (c. 659–680 AD) the region in 676 AD for the local synod he took Isaac back with him to Bet Arameye which was the centre of the Church of the East near Seleucia-Ctesiphon. ... He was then made bishop of Nineveh but asked to be relieved of his duties after only five months as a bishop.*²³

He returned to the life of a monk, and during that time wrote his influential works. His spirituality made him one of the foremost writers of the entire Syrian tradition, both of the Syrian Orthodox and the Church of the East, his works also significantly impacting the Greek Church. He remains one of the most significant figures of Eastern Christian monasticism, even

²² Brock, S.P. (2000). "Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye". *ARAM* 11/12. Colless, B. (trans). (2008). *The Wisdom of the Pearlers. An Anthology of Syriac Christian Mysticism*. Michigan: Cistercian Publishers. Winkler, D.W. (2007). *Syriac Churches Encountering Islam. Past Experiences and Future Perspectives*. New Jersey: Gorgias Press. Smith, G.R. et al. (1997). *New Arabian Studies Vol 4*. Exeter: Exeter University Press.

²³ Loosley, E. (2002). *A Historical Overview of the Arabian Gulf in the Late Pre-Islamic Period: The Evidence for Christianity in the Gulf*. Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey. Page 14.

today, because the church still uses his liturgies. Other notable theologians and scholars shaping the Orthodox Church who came from the Beth Qatraye district included Dadisho Qatraya, who is famed for being the learned superior of the Marr Abraham Monastery as well as for his writing.²⁴

Others include Gabriel Qatraye, though there may be more than one person with this name. Whether one or many, this was a name associated with a skilled biblical scholar, Abraham Qatrya Bar Lipahis, known for his extant work on the liturgy. Another scholar from the region is Ahob or Ayoub Qatraya. Loosley, in her paper, states

*that this is the writer who probably wrote the ‘Cause of the Psalms’ which was an introduction to the Psalter. Extracts of his work were later utilised by Ibn Al Tayyib (d. 1043 AD) who wrote Biblical commentaries in Arabic which were widely used in the Oriental Orthodox tradition and were translated in Ge’ez and Amharic which is used by the Ethiopian Church today.*²⁵

Loosley then lists other scholars, including Ishpanah Qatraya, Jacob Qatraya, Jacob Bishop of Darin, Rabban Bar Sihde and an anonymous monk who translated the law book of Simeon of Rec-Ardashir from Persian into Syriac. The monk was from the region of Beth Qatraye and was carrying out the work at the request of the Priest Simeon. Thus, the Church in the far eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula was not some quiet backwater but, in fact, contributed greatly to the intellectual life and theology of the Orthodox Church tradition. The greatest of these writers was Isaac,

*who remains the most influential Church Father of the whole Syrian sphere of influence. Both East and West Syrian traditions and other ‘foreign’ Churches such as the Greek Orthodox still revere him. Not even Saint Ephrem that other great Syrian writer has been translated into as many languages as Isaac and his work is still seen as influencing Eastern monasticism today. Most of the theologians and scholar mentioned above are circa seventh century. This probably implies the presence at that time somewhere in Bet Qatraye of one or more church/monastery schools whose teaching was on the level of higher education, and this comparable to that of the famous school at Nisibis.*²⁶

²⁴ Brock, S.P. (2000). “Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye”. *ARAM* 11/12. Page 18.

²⁵ Loosley, E. (2002). *A Historical Overview of the Arabian Gulf in the Late Pre-Islamic Period: The Evidence for Christianity in the Gulf*. Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey. Page 18.

²⁶ Brock, S.P. (2000). “Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye”. *ARAM* 11/12. Page 95.

All of this provokes the observer to re-evaluate the presence of the church in the Gulf. It not only established monastic communities up and down the coast, but was also deeply embedded in the trading culture, with favoured protection rights from the Sassanian Empire, and home to at least one seat of learning that points to a mature and vibrant school of theology. This theology, however, was expressed through a language and culture alien to an Arab people, which perhaps is another clue as to why Christianity never developed roots deep enough to stay in the Gulf region long-term.

After the seventh century, the historical record of Christianity in the region falls into a virtual silence. The last major reference to it in Syriac literature was in the year AD 676.²⁷ This reference relates to the last great synod of Arabian bishops who met on the island of Tarut in the Gulf region.

Later minor references include a charming ninth-century story, which tells of a giant fish terrorising the pearl fleets in the Gulf, so much so that they refused to sail, thus provoking the Christian pearl divers to pray. The answer to their prayers came in the form of small fish, which lodged themselves in the gills of the giant menace and thus suffocated it to death.²⁸ This reference is used to suggest that there was still a Christian presence in the Gulf in the ninth century. Finally, the last minor reference to the ‘priests of Beth Qatraye’ is found in a collection of Syriac prayers written in the twelfth century.²⁹ Afterwards, the historical records dry up and there is no mention of the Christian presence in the Gulf until the appearance of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century.

THE EARLY CHURCH IN OMAN

Down in the south-eastern part of the Gulf, bishops were appointed to lead churches and bring the Gospel to the tribes who inhabited the region. Thus, there was a bishop from AD 525 in what is now known as Qatar as well as a bishop in Sohar in Oman. The story of the Church in Oman goes back to Constantine. At the time of Constantine, a man from Socotra, called Theophilus, who was educated in the Roman Empire, was sent by Constantine to Yemen to convert the people there. The king and some of

²⁷ Winkler, D.W. (2007). *Syriac Churches Encountering Islam. Past Experiences and Future Perspectives*. New Jersey: Gorgias Press. Page 53.

²⁸ Potts, D.T. (1983). *Dilmun. New Studies in the Archaeology and Early History of Bahrain*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.

²⁹ Fiey, J.M. (1993). “Pour un Oriens Christianus Novus”. *Beiruter Texte und Studien* 49.

his subjects became Christian. He built churches in Aden, Sana'a, Hormuz (at the entrance to the Gulf) and Dhofar.³⁰

Mazun³¹ specifically included Oman and what was known as Greater Oman. According to Hawley,

*[t]here was a large Christian population in Oman before Islam although the Julanda princes themselves were not Christian. Oman had several bishops who presided over churches whose origins lie with the mission of a man called Theophilus Indus. He was a native of Dabul near Karachi, was taken as a hostage in captivity to Rome and subsequently sent by the Emperor Constantine II to convert the Tobba or King of the Himyarites to Christianity. His mission succeeded and he received permission to erect three churches, one at Sanaa, one at Aden and one on the Gulf region—probably at Sohar. It is not clear whether the earlier mission of Frumentius affected Oman, but Oman's first bishop, John, was appointed in the fifth century and its last recorded bishop was Stephen who was alive in AD 676.*³²

Trimingham confirms the conclusions of other scholars:

*At least one Bishopric was established in what is now Oman at Sohar. Bishop Yohannan attended the Synod of Markabta in 424 AD, Bishop David attended the consecration of Mar Aba as Catholicos in 544 AD and Bishops Samuel and Stephanus from Sohar were present at the councils of 576 AD and 676 AD.*³³

It is interesting to note that the 'Azd tribe who migrated to Oman from Yemen were probably Christians who were moving away from the persecution of the Jewish Himyarite regime.³⁴ The 'Azd tribe were to become the first tribe to embrace Islam and later on became champions of the Ibadi doctrine.³⁵ *This implies that tribalism is a significant factor when it comes to religious conversion and identity in the Arabian Peninsula.*

³⁰Wright, T. (1855). *Early Christianity in Arabia: A Historical Essay*. London: Bernard Quaritch.

³¹Mazun is the Persian name for Northern Oman.

³²Hawley, D. (1970). *The Trucial States*. London: George Allen & Unwin. Page 48.

³³Trimingham, J.S. (1990). *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban. Page 41.

³⁴Trimingham, J.S. (1990). *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban. Badger, G.P. (trans). (2010). *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman by Salil Ibn Razik*. Whitefish, Montana: Reprint by Kessinger Publications.

³⁵Hawley, D. (1989). *Oman and Its Renaissance*. London: Stacey International. Page 166. O'Leary, D.L. (2000). *Arabia before Muhammad*. London: Routledge.

The presence of an ancient church leaves a faint echo in the memories of the Omani people. The American Mission records that '[t]here is evidence of long forgotten Christian antecedents on the part of some. One tribe at least are certainly descendants of Christians in Asia Minor. In a few localities the Arabs tell of monks that used to live in the mountains and caves.'³⁶

TRIBAL

Pre-Islamic Arabian Christianity exposes that the tribal nature of society is instrumental for the growth of the church. Although the early Christian evangelists and monastics traversed through well-established trade routes, crisscrossing the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean,³⁷ they were linked with particular tribes. 'Nestorians played an important role in the spread of Christianity in North East Arabia and subsequently some sections of the Arab tribes in the area became Christian, such as the Kalb, 'Abd al-Qays and Tamim'.³⁸

Trade and Tribe are particularly entwined and hard to separate. Long before oil was discovered in the region, economic forces were at work which shaped the religious climate. There is a theory that the trades which dominated Qatar in particular, as well as the wealth of Oman, came from their control of the maritime industry (pearling), the precursor to the rentier state mentality.³⁹ The ruling families thus came from the tribes which had control of these industries.

Examining the life of the Church in Arabia during the pre-Islamic era allows us to see what other factors were at work upon it. Very quickly, we see that tribal and cultural (including linguistic) factors and the Church's engagement with economic modes of production determine the success, and the durability and size, of the Christian community.

³⁶ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1988). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 83:5.

³⁷ McLaughlin, R. (2010). *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*. London: Bloomsbury.

³⁸ Smith, G.R. et al. (2004). *New Arabian Studies. Vol 6*. Exeter: Exeter University Press. Page 208.

³⁹ Herb, M. (1999). *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*. New York: State University of New York Press. Foley, S. (2010). *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

These tribal influences are clearly manifested as early as the fourth century, as those from the Arabian tribes of Ghassan (the Bani Ghassan lived in the area of the East Bank of Jordan down as far as the northern part of Arabia), Rabia, the Bani Taghlib (an Iraqi Bedouin tribe), the Bahra, Tonuch and part of the tribes of Tay and Kodua had become Christian. Also, in the central Najd area of Arabia, there is evidence of the Kinda tribe adopting Christianity as their faith. Hugh Goddard explains the development of Christianity towards the Gulf:

On the north-eastern frontier of Arabia, the area bordering on Iraq, which was then a province of the Sassanian Empire, a similar process of the diffusion of the Christian message took place among some of the Arab tribes, but it was a different branch of the church which took root here. Politically an important tribe in the region was the tribe of Lakhm, which was the main rival of the Ghassanids during the sixth century, and enjoyed a similar system of patronage to the Sassanian Empire as did the Ghassanids to Byzantium. Its ruler between 583 AD and 602 AD, Nu'man Ibn Mundhir, was a convert to Christianity and it was the Nestorian church (also known as the Church of the East) to which he became affiliated. This reflected the influence of the Church of the East within the Persian Empire. The Lakhmid capital, al-Hira, had been a centre of the Church of the East since the 4th century, and further south on the eastern shores of the Gulf. The Church of the East had also taken root, again partly in connection with the diffusion of Persian cultural and political influence, so that Bahrain had Nestorian Bishops.⁴⁰

The Lakhmid Empire operated a large fleet along the Bahraini coast, which facilitated trade as well as offering protection to the people who followed the Nestorian creed. Thus, with regard to the northern Gulf, the Lakhmid tribe is the most significant community who established Christianity in the region. Hence, the Lakhmid tribe offered a buffer state between the Sassanians and the Eastern Roman Empire. With a Lakhmid Christian Arab king who converted in AD 512 (Al-Mundhir III bin Nu'man III) and who was established and supported in his rule by the Sassanian Emperor,⁴¹ the Nestorians found a safe haven which was centrally located for trade all across the south-eastern coast of Arabia.

⁴⁰ Goddard, H. (2000). *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Chicago: New Amsterdam Books. Page 16.

⁴¹ Hellyer, P. (2001). "Nestorian Christianity in the Pre-Islamic UAE and Southeastern Arabia". *Journal of Social Affairs*. Vol 188. No. 72. Page 89.

TRADE

Trade and commerce were important facets of mission as we see from the Nestorian usage of the trade routes as mentioned earlier. Yet, despite the presence of the Roman and Sassanian Empires, centralised power could not reach all of the Arabian Peninsula. Arab tribal society was deeply fractured⁴² and the main means of (economic) control were located in trading towns and cities, predominantly on the coast.⁴³ The spread of Christianity then followed these trading centres all the way to China from the Middle East.⁴⁴

Maritime evidence suggests that the Southern Gulf was a major hub of trading, and that the Christians seem to have used different routes and utilised new harbours, which led to the Sassanian rulers rewarding the Christian traders for their prosperous enterprise by offering them religious freedom. Hence the presence of church buildings on the coastal regions of the south-eastern Gulf reflects a ruling bargain.⁴⁵

The favour shown to the Nestorian church by the Sassanian authorities was a key factor in their prosperity and survival. A survey by a Nestorian scholar concluded that

*[t]he Arabs followed the Sassanian monarchs in favouring the Nestorians and at the same time keeping them under strict control. The Nestorians were not seriously persecuted by their Arab governors and for eight hundred years the Nestorian church was, with fluctuations of prosperity, a mighty organization, one whose missionary enterprise is unsurpassed in the history of Christianity. It had twenty or more metropolitan sees with many bishoprics and monasteries, extending to China and India.*⁴⁶

⁴² Gellner, E. (1981). *Muslim Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴³ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books.

⁴⁴ Moffett, S.H. (2009). *A History of Christianity in Asia. Vol I*. New York: Orbis Books.
Loosley, E. (2002). *A Historical Overview of the Arabian Gulf in the late Pre-Islamic Period: The Evidence for Christianity in the Gulf*. Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey.

⁴⁵ Gropp, G. (1991). "Christian Maritime Trade of Sasanian Age in the Persian Gulf", in Schippman, K., Herling, A., & Salles, J.F. (eds) (1991). *Golf-Archäologie*. Buch am Erlbach.
Loosley, E. (2002). *A Historical Overview of the Arabian Gulf in the late Pre-Islamic Period: The Evidence for Christianity in the Gulf*. Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey.

⁴⁶ Attwater, D. (1961). *The Christian Churches of the East. Vol II*. London: Geoffrey Chapman. Pages 170–171.

One impact of this trading benefit with the Sassanian Empire was that the Persian language became the dominant language of commerce.⁴⁷ The seat of the most important metropolitan bishop of the region was located at Rec-Ardashir on the Persian side of the Gulf, strategically placed in order to curry favour from the Sassanian rulers.

Linguistically, at that time, the Christians were worshipping in the liturgical language of Syriac, living amongst Arabic-speaking indigenous tribes and doing business in Persian. Yet the Syriac Christians had some success in their mission of converting the local people to their faith. Among the first to respond to the Christian message were the tribes of *Abd al-Qais* and *Baker b. Wail*.⁴⁸

Pearl diving was a prominent activity throughout the Gulf and there is evidence that the church was deeply involved in this trade. The island of Kharg, on the Persian side of the Gulf, was famed for its black pearls and for a large monastery which used the pearl trade not merely for financial gain but also for political influence.⁴⁹ Loosley notes numerous references to pearling in the ecclesiastical literature. She cites as an example

*the Letter of Catholicos Isho Yahv I (AD 582–95) to Bishop Jacob of Darin which clearly states that pearl divers must be left to make their own decision whether or not to work on a Sunday. In what appears to be a special concession, the Catholicos says this is a matter left to the conscience of the diver and no one else.*⁵⁰

An unexpected source revealing links between the pearl trade and Christianity is the work of musicologist, Jason Carter, who, when filming a documentary about pearl-diving music, came across the following:

The 5 songs we are focussing on are called 'Fijeri, songs of the Dawn'. The myth associated with these songs is that 3 pearl divers were wandering the shores near a Mosque in North Bahrain late one night, and they heard some new songs coming from behind the Mosque. They were curious and went to see where this 'new

⁴⁷ Potts, D.T. (1990). *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity: Volume II: From Alexander the Great to the Coming of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁸ Kozah, M., Abu-Husayn, A., Al-Murikhi, & Al Thani, H. (2014). *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press. Page 23.

⁴⁹ Bowman, J. (1973). "The Sasanian church in the Kharg Island". *Acta Iranica* Vol. I.

⁵⁰ Loosley, E. (2002). *A Historical Overview of the Arabian Gulf in the Late Pre-Islamic Period: The Evidence for Christianity in the Gulf*. Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey. Page 20.

sound' was coming from and they stumbled across 3 'spirits', singing these songs. The spirits promised to teach these new songs to the pearl divers on one condition, that they would never share them or face death. The pearl divers promised and learnt the songs. Many years later, 2 of the guys had died of old age and the third was on his death bed. He decided to share these songs with his friends before he died, so the music would live on.

This is the myth, told in various shape or form.

But tonight, one of the older pearl divers told me this:

Bahrain was one of the first places that Islam spread to—it was a 'Christian' nation before. Islam spread easily in Bahrain because the Church was in disarray so it was an easy 'target'. These 5 songs are in fact 5 of the oldest Christian songs sang by Christians and when Islam spread to Bahrain, the underground Christians kept singing these songs as worship songs. Slowly, over the years, the lyrics changed and they become associated with pearl diving. But in the words of the old man, he said 'These are worship songs to God with Christian roots.'⁵¹

Another surprising trade in which the monasteries had an empire-sanctioned monopoly for the Gulf region was the wine industry. The wine was usually produced by the monasteries in Egypt and Syria and could only be procured in the Gulf through the church.⁵²

We also know that Christians from Beth Qatraye were used as translators. Syriac was the local literary and liturgical language, but Persian and Arabic were also used, as well as probably some Greek. There may have also been a local language or dialect in Qatar itself. The Persian translator for the Lahmid king, Al Numan III (AD 579–604), was a Christian from Beth Qatraye.⁵³

One potentially rich area for research is examining the Syriac origins of place names and tribal names in the Arabian Gulf to rediscover the pre-Islamic Christian presence.

TERROR

The role of tribal and kin groups becomes even more prominent when set against the backdrop of migrant movements across the region, a result of war or persecution. The presence of a large Syriac community in the region

⁵¹ Carter 2017. Private email to researcher 24 January 2014.

⁵² Payne, R. (2011). "Monks, Dinars, and Date Palms: Hagiographical Production and the Expansion of Monastic Institutions in the Early Islamic Persian Gulf," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 22: Page 107.

⁵³ Talbot, E. (2009). *Desert Blooms: A History of the Catholic Church of Qatar*. Unpublished Manuscript. Page 173.

during the early years of Christianity is due in part to the deportation policy of the Sassanian King Shapur I, who removed large numbers of Syriac Christian prisoners from Antioch after defeating the Romans in AD 256.⁵⁴ Other movements were caused by persecution from the Byzantine church in the Levant and the Himyarite Jewish regime in Yemen which drove the Christians towards the Arabian Gulf coastal areas.

Archaeological evidence for this upheaval of Antioch's citizens are found across the Gulf from the Palmyrene-type carvings found on tombs in the northern Persian side of the Gulf to Syriac inscriptions on the island of Tarut. Many of the deported prisoners settled in Mesopotamia and Iran, but further persecution by King Shapur II (AD 339–379) drove them further south into the Gulf where they settled on the coast of what is now Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. There, they survived through trading and joining in with the local industries of subsistence farming, fishing and pearl diving.

Another savage era of persecution occurred in Persia during the reign of Yezdigird and his successor Bahram 'during nearly twenty years of the commencement of the fifth century, said to have originated from the zeal of a Christian bishop, who had destroyed a temple of the Persian fire-worshippers. Amongst those who suffered in it are preserved the names and histories of Maharsapor and St Jacobus'.⁵⁵

As the Church in Mesopotamia continued to go through repeated phases of persecution, the Syriac Christians naturally followed the path of their kin who had gone before them and in this way the Nestorian Church moved steadily into the southern part of the Arabian Gulf.⁵⁶

The cruelty of the persecution by the Sassanians led to a mass terror which gave the Christians no option but to flee for their lives. The tortures for those caught are outlined as follows:

⁵⁴ Smith, G.R., et al. (1997). *New Arabian Studies Vol 4*. Exeter: Exeter University Press.
Wright, T. (1855). *Early Christianity in Arabia: A Historical Essay*. London: Bernard Quaritch.

⁵⁵ Wright, T. (1855). *Early Christianity in Arabia: A Historical Essay*. London: Bernard Quaritch. Page 80.

⁵⁶ Brock, S.P. (2000). "Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye". *ARAM* 11/12. Hellyer, P. (2001). "Nestorian Christianity in the Pre-Islamic UAE and Southeastern Arabia". *Journal of Social Affairs*. Vol 188. No. 72. Smith, G.R., et al. (1997). *New Arabian Studies Vol 4*. Exeter: Exeter University Press.

The confessors of faith were not just beheaded, stoned or crucified, they were murdered in sadistic ways that caused the greatest amount of pain. For instance, the executioner slit the victim's throat in such a way that he could tear out the tongue through the gaping wound. Others ripped off the skin of the face down to the neck or subjected them to the torture of the iron combs, in which the victim was thrown to the ground with limbs extended and nails driven into hands and feet, and then his body was combed until the flesh was peeled off from the bones. ... In other instances, victims were thrown into pits filled with countless hungry rats and other vermin, where they were eaten alive by these creatures. In special cases, martyrs suffered the nine-fold death in which the executioners over the course of six successive days, slowly cut off the limbs: first the fingers, then the toes, wrist, ankles, forearms and lower legs, upper arms, thighs, ears, nose, and finally the head. In order to forestall a premature death from blood loss the fresh wounds were cauterized. Finally mass executions were carried out by cramming Christians into a tight space and using as many as three hundred elephants to trample them to death.⁵⁷

No wonder they fled. Many ended up on the other side of the Arabian Gulf, joining the Christian trading communities.

SO, WHAT HAPPENED TO THE EARLY CHRISTIANS IN THE ARABIAN GULF?

There are two schools of thought. One portrays Islam as a source of persecution and argues that the early Church in the Middle East was slaughtered almost to the point of extinction. They point to the Hadith, which records that as the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) was dying, he declared that '[t]hroughout the peninsula there shall be no second creed'.⁵⁸ So, even though succeeding caliphs accepted help from Arab Christians, they kept this objective a priority. In some places, Christian Arab males were killed and the women and children taken into slavery. In other cases, such as at Najran, all the Christians were deported by order of the Caliph Omar to Northern Iraq. In many cases, such as in Bahrain, Sohar in Oman, Yemen and Central Arabia, the choice was to become Muslim or to leave. Many became Muslims to save their property. By the time of the fourth

⁵⁷ Baumer, C. (2006). *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*. London: I.B. Tauris. Page 71.

⁵⁸ Ibn Annas, M. (Trans. Bewley, A.) (2014). *Al-Muwatta' of Imam Malik*. Norwich: Diwan Press. Page 630.

Caliph Ali (AD 656–661), Islam was considered obligatory for all Arabs in Arabia and Christians had diminished in numbers.

The problem with this theory is that there is little evidence to support it. It is true that the Christians acquired *dhimmi*⁵⁹ status and, as a subject people, were required to pay a tax called *jizya*, but slaughter on any scale by the Muslims at this time was unusual. The worst period of persecution of Christians in the Arabian Peninsula was inflicted not by Muslim armies, but by the Jewish kings of Yemen. The second theory is a more subtle suggestion. John ‘Pasha’ Glubb, for example, suggests that the predominance of Greek (Byzantine) theology and philosophy alienated the Arab mindset from Christian belief, and that Islam itself was protesting that the real message of Christianity had been submerged by the subtleties of Byzantine and Nestorian dogma. This may explain the mass movement of Arab Christians that were converting to Islam. Islam simply made more sense to them after the convoluted theological debates of the early Church.⁶⁰

Here for the first time is a suggestion that the theology of Islam and its manifestation in economic and social terms (*jizya* and *dhimmitude*) had a tangible effect on the Christian community in the Arabian Gulf.

The ruins of the churches suggest that they fell into a state of disrepair from lack of use rather than by deliberate destruction. It also suggests, as confirmed by Nestorian church records, that following the rise of Islam, many of the Christians simply converted to the new faith. The fact that the monastery of Sir Bani Yas survived into the Umayyad dynasty showed that Arab Christians were tolerated, and they practised their religion openly. It also proves that a great deal of religious freedom was tolerated by early Islam. Joseph Elders commented:

After the coming of Islam, the monastery survived another 150 years—is this an early demonstration of Islam’s tolerance for other religions? The monastery was not destroyed by pirates and it seemed to have faded away. We imagined that two or three old monks who couldn’t think of anywhere to go just lived out their last few years here and that was the end of the monastery—peaceful and quiet and around the year 750 AD.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Dhimmi refers to the classification of Christians and Jews as a lower status group in Islamic law than Muslim citizens and as such had to pay a special tax which Muslims were exempt from.

⁶⁰ Glubb, J.B. (1969). *A Short History of the Arab Peoples*. London: Stein & Day.

⁶¹ Elders, quoted in *Khaleej Times* 18 December 2010.

The mass conversion of Christians to the Islamic faith was influenced by a number of factors. Firstly, the impact of *dhimmitude* effectively limited economic progress for Christians and so conversion meant better business and social networks. Secondly, the theological debates of Christian councils regarding the nature of God and Christ had become so convoluted, obscure and vindictive that the simple creed of Islam must have come as a welcome relief.⁶²

This point of view is expanded by Trimmingham in his conclusion of why Christianity failed to remain among the Arab tribes. He argued that the Gospel never penetrated the interior of Arabia, as this was the abode of the nomads who embodied the tribal ideals of purity, toughness and resilience which were admired by the settled Arabs. The need of a divine saviour would seem alien to pragmatic demands of desert survival. The lifestyle of the nomads called for a tight-knit interdependence on tribal allegiances. Religion often fell into the category of a political tool, in which it was adopted or discarded as necessary for strengthening tribal allegiances.

The egalitarian nature of nomadic life, according to Trimmingham, would have also rejected the elitist dualism of Syriac Christianity in which there was a dichotomy between the ordained leaders and the laity, 'whereby a celibate elite constituted the Church and the people ranked as recipients of its benefits, but not as participants in its values'.⁶³

Ultimately, it was the failure of Christianity to express the faith in the language of Arabic, which meant that the Arabs always saw it as a foreign element. The insistence of the Church to maintain its liturgy in Syriac led to a cultural disconnect. The great appeal of Islam when it arrived, in contrast, was that it celebrated that the Arabs had received a divine revelation which was in Arabic.

It would seem that the language and culture of the ancient churches were subsumed by the growing Islamic culture and Arabic language. Some evidence for this is provided through the letters of the Nestorian Bishop, Isho'yahb III, who complained that 'many members of his flock were resorting to secular non-Christian (Islamic) courts to settle disputes'.⁶⁴ There is also reference to the fact that many Christians in Oman had

⁶² Glubb, J.B. (1969). *A Short History of the Arab Peoples*. London: Stein & Day.

⁶³ Trimmingham, J.S. (1990). *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban. Page 309.

⁶⁴ Colless, B. (Trans). (2008). *The Wisdom of the Pearlers. An Anthology of Syriac Christian Mysticism*. Michigan: Cistercian Publishers. P. 71.

converted to Islam rather than paying the required tax. The main accusation, however, is that they had cut themselves off from the home 'bishopric'.⁶⁵

Isho'yahb III's letters are important for another reason. His letters are the first recorded response to Islam from a Christian leader. They reveal a 'complicated reaction to Islam in that he emphasizes an eirenic view and focusses on spiritual issues rather than the political ones. The Christians of the Gulf should, he thinks, pay whatever taxes are demanded rather than give up their faith. ... His letter reveals that the Christians of the Gulf had two choices: either convert, or pay the taxes demanded.'⁶⁶ This clearly ended the economic privileges of the Christian community under the Sassanian Empire and, with it, their freedom to worship was under threat.

Records from the Beth Qatraye Synod of AD 676 reveal that the church's response to Islam involved paying the poll tax for non-Muslims and that they insisted that Christian men must only have one wife. However, the overriding impression from this Synod is that there was no intercommunal violence between Christians and Muslims.⁶⁷

Loosley summarises the disappearance of Christianity concisely:

*By the ninth century, due to a disruption of trade routes from Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the appeal of Messianic Islam (the Qarmatian branch of Ismailiyya Islam was dominant in the region), and the common culture and language of the local people led slowly but inexorably towards a final extinction of Christianity in Arabia.*⁶⁸

Loosley mentions in passing the role of the Qarmatians in disrupting trade. I suspect that the Qarmatians may be in fact the main reason why Christianity disappeared from the region. It is not a coincidence that the records of the Christian church go silent around the eighth century AD as this was the era when the Qarmatian leader Abu Said established his

⁶⁵ Hunter, E.C.D. (ed). (2009). *The Christian Heritage of Iraq: Collected Papers from the Christianity of Iraq I-V Seminar Days*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press. Pages 3–4.

⁶⁶ Hunter, E.C.D. (ed). (2009). *The Christian Heritage of Iraq: Collected Papers from the Christianity of Iraq I-V Seminar Days*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press. Page 7.

⁶⁷ Potts, D.T. (1983). *Dilmun. New Studies in the Archaeology and Early History of Bahrain*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer. Page 186.

⁶⁸ Loosley, E. (2002). *A Historical Overview of the Arabian Gulf in the late Pre-Islamic Period: The Evidence for Christianity in the Gulf*. Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey. Page 30.

surprisingly efficient community on the island of Bahrain and from there went on to dominate the Arabian Peninsula, particularly the east coast of what is now Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman.⁶⁹

Allegedly named after their founder Hamdan Qarmat, who led a violent revolution against the Abbasid Empire with a large group of discontented slaves, the Qarmatians caused regional horror when they attacked a haj caravan slaughtering up to 20,000 pilgrims. Then in AD 930 they attacked Mecca itself, defiling the waters of the sacred Zam Zam well by dumping the corpses of the slaughtered Meccan into the well itself. The ultimate sacrilege was in the desecration of the Ka'ba by stealing the black cloth covering, and by taking away the black meteorite stone which was embedded in its corner. This was eventually returned some 22 years later, but not before it had been broken into pieces.

The Qarmatians were ferocious in their attacks on the Sunni communities in the region. They themselves were a fractured group emerging out of the Ismaili Shia group, which also produced rebels who went on to found the Fatimid dynasty based in Egypt.

Most of the historical evidence which we now possess was written by enemies of Qarmatians, who portray them as heretics and savages who were devoid of religion. Historical accounts have the Qarmatians demonised by both Christians and Muslims, and it is plausible to believe that the religious fanaticism that is ascribed to the Qarmatians, which led to the ransacking of Mecca and murder of Muslim pilgrims, would also be equally savage towards those who were non-Muslims. This resulted in an accelerated decline in the Christian population.

Yet an alternative view focuses on the economic dynamic inherent in the Qarmatian rebels who consisted mainly of 'large groups of peasants and agricultural workers and slaves and the artisans, toilers and the poor people in the towns of Southern Iraq'.⁷⁰ Some scholars thus see the Qarmatians in terms of the class struggle which resulted in the formation of a 'communist style' ethos, resulting in one scholar branding them the 'Bolsheviks' of Islam and others calling them the first socialist movement

⁶⁹ Prawer, J. & Ben-Shammai, H. (1996). *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period (638–1099)*. New York: New York University Press. Peters, F.E. (2003). *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conflict and Competition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁷⁰ Mahjoub, N. (2008). "The Qarmatians." <http://middleeastpanorama.blogspot.ac/2014/03/the-qarmatians-al-qaramita.html>. Accessed 18/07/2016.

in Islam who established a more egalitarian social system than any known.⁷¹ This was reflected in the ‘ownership of property, cultivation of agricultural land, collection of taxes, distribution of public taxes and assistance to the underprivileged’.⁷² This rather idealistic view of the Qarmatian economy is dismissed by Commins, who saw this as a ‘false tale’ circulated by Sunni authors. They promoted the belief that, as well as communalism of wealth, the Qarmatians also shared their wives.⁷³

Khusrow, the famed Persian poet and traveller, observed that in Bahrain there was no Friday worship in the mosque or prayers and although they did not stop anyone from praying, they themselves did not, thus revealing that at the heart of the Qarmatian worldview is a philosophical and political ideology rather than a religious belief.⁷⁴ Supporting this point of view of the marginal role of religion in the Qarmatian community is a comment from the Muslim scholar Al-Baghdadi, who records that they ‘denied all the prophets and ate dogs, cats and donkeys in contradiction of Islamic law. ... They also prohibited visiting tombs and kissing them.’⁷⁵

These latter Muslim witnesses need to have their voices filtered through the context of the competitive field of sectarianism, which marked Islam during this era.

So, what would the economic effect be on the Christian community, especially on the Christian bishoprics who were based in Bahrain and Qatar? One feature of the new economic regime was that only the Qarmatians benefitted from the distribution of wealth. Whereas before the Christians were active participants in generating wealth within the Abbasid and Sassanian Empires, this time they were excluded. The Christians were not victimised because of their religion; indeed, the ‘Qarmatians had a positive attitude towards Christians and their beliefs and including that Jesus had an important place in their theological system, resulting in their prayer direction being Jerusalem rather than Mecca’.⁷⁶ Instead the Christians suffered because they were not involved in the economy of the

⁷¹ Madelung, W. (1998). *An Ismaili Heresiography*. Amsterdam: Leiden.

⁷² Dafarty, F. (1990). “The Qarmatians”. *Encyclopaedia Iranica* Vol IV. 823–832. London & New York: Ehsan Yarshater.

⁷³ Commins, D. (2012). *The Gulf States: A Modern History*. London: I.B. Tauris. Page 21.

⁷⁴ Thackston, W.M. (1986). *Naser E. Khusrow. Book of Travels. Persian Heritage Series*. New York: State University of New York Press. Page 88.

⁷⁵ Al-Maarif (1948). “Al-Baghdadi”. *Al Farq bain al Farig*, p. 277. Cairo, Egypt. Page 277.

⁷⁶ Prawer, J. & Ben-Shammai, H. (1996). *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period (638–1099)*. New York: New York University Press. Page 19.

new regime. The rules and partners for trade had changed and all they could do was either assimilate, by changing their religious identity, or move from the region.

The Church of the East is still extant, its survival due in part to the preservation of liturgy and rites. These are still used today, especially in the churches of Syria, Iraq and India. Surprisingly, after hundreds of years of being absent from the region, this ancient Syriac liturgy is once again emerging in expatriate Arab churches in the Gulf in the twenty-first century.

SUMMARY

In summary, the evidence of the church in the pre-Islamic Arabian Gulf was predominantly defined by its tribal allegiances. Tribal cultures include a sharing of the same language (as well as blood ties), in this case Syriac, which was gradually subsumed by the prevailing regional languages of Arabic and Persian. Following well-established trading routes, the Christian population grew through a pattern of migration due to persecution—either by the Sassanian Empire (who were predominantly Zoroastrian), the Eastern Roman Empire (allied to the Roman Catholic Church) who declared ‘Nestorianism as a despised heresy in AD 43’⁷⁷ or the Hamyarite Jewish kingdom in Yemen.

The Persian location and character of the Metropolitan proved to be a source of friction between the Syriac-speaking Christians of Beth Qatraye who naturally looked to their co-linguists back in Mesopotamia. In contrast, Beth Mazunaye adopted the Persian liturgy of their Metropolitan although Arabic was more their *lingua franca*. However, as the Metropolitan was soon to lament, his Christian flock were only too quick to change their religion to Islam, in exchange for financial and social gains when Oman came firmly under the control of the Caliphate.⁷⁸

The Persian influence may have also accelerated the rapid decline of Christianity in Beth Mazunaye in AD 630, as the Islamic forces led by the al-Julanda princes⁷⁹ drove the Sassanian settlers out of Oman and pursued them across the sea to Persia itself. Thus, the Persian-speaking Christians

⁷⁷ Vine, A. (1937). *The Nestorian Churches*. London: Independent Press.

⁷⁸ Fiey, J.M. (1969). Iso’yaw le grand. Vie du catholicos nestorien Iso’yaw III d’Adiabene. *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 35: 305–333.

⁷⁹ King, G.R.D. (2001). “The Coming of Islam and the Islamic Period in the UAE”. In Al-Abed, I. and Hellyer, P. (eds), *The United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*. London: Trident Press. Page 81.

were under suspicion as allies of the Sassanian Empire and consequently their public profile in Oman vanished swiftly.

We also see that the Christian community flourished when they received favour from the regional empire, thus protecting their trading routes and commerce. However, when the regime turned against them and withdrew their protection and privileges, their trade suffered, their supply lines were threatened and their presence as worshipping communities diminished. This decline was further aided by internal disputes (seemingly along tribal, cultural and linguistic divides). The seventh century seems to mark the zenith of their time in the Gulf, a period of stability which enabled the erection of several monasteries along the eastern coast of the Gulf, and it also witnessed the production of outstanding theologians and liturgists, whose work remains the bedrock of Eastern Christianity today. The church was embedded in the pearling industry, monopolised wine retail and ran profitable date farms.⁸⁰

Religious freedom, such as it was experienced by the Christians in the ancient pre-Islamic world, seems to have been an alignment of tribal alliances, a strong economic niche which in turn led to a ruling bargain with the Abbasid Empire on the Arabian side and the Sassanian Emperor on the Persian side, all of which ended with the arrival of revivalist Islam (Qarmatian and Ibadi).

The main options facing Christians under the rapid Islamic expansionism was convert, pay *jizya* (tax) or leave the Dar-al-Islam. During the reign of Caliph Haroun al-Rashidi, Christians were expelled from Najran (a major economic centre); only the Taghlibi tribe were exempt from the *jizya* tax, thus enabling them to survive economically. By the seventh century under the reign of Caliph Uthman Ibn Affan (AD 544–656), the Christian population had all but melted away.⁸¹

The spread of Christianity in the Gulf can be seen in this chapter to be following established trading centres and that access was facilitated through tribal links. In pre-Islamic Arabia, apart from various Jewish colonies, the religious climate predominantly consisted of pagan or animistic cults which worshipped nature in the form of trees, rocks, the moon and

⁸⁰ Payne, R. (2011). "Monks, Dinars, and Date Palms: Hagiographical Production and the Expansion of Monastic Institutions in the Early Islamic Persian Gulf". *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 22.

⁸¹ Winkler, D.W. (2007). *Syriac Churches Encountering Islam. Past Experiences and Future Perspectives*. New Jersey: Gorgias Press. Page 53.

so on. There seemed to be nothing intrinsic in the religion of Christianity at that time which would lead pagan Arabs to mass conversions. Rather, Christianity flowed into the region as a result of Christians fleeing from cycles of persecution from the Roman or Sassanian Empire.

Another observation is that Christianity in the Arabian Gulf was largely situated in coastal areas. Gathered as they were around maritime trade, this is perhaps not so surprising. What is surprising is that many centuries later the pattern has not changed. Despite the sweep of the expatriate communities into all corners of Oman and Qatar, the church buildings themselves are located in the coastal cities and are virtually non-existent in the interior.



CHAPTER 4

Ibadi Theology and Christian Engagement

How did an obscure minority sect within the Islamic world come to be the dominant school of Islam in the country of Oman? Who are the Ibadis? Where did they come from? What are their distinctive features compared to other Islamic traditions and nations? Do they have a theology which informs their treatment of the religious ‘other’? What were their early encounters with the Christian Church like? These are just some of the questions that we seek to answer in this chapter.

Oman¹ is a difficult country to survey academically. In many ways it feels like three countries, which have their own unique histories, cultures and even languages.² First, there is the Oman of the coastline with a long, distinguished maritime tradition, an essential link in empire building (Zanzibar) and trade with India, Africa, Persia and even China. Then there is the Oman of the interior, which is isolated by desert and mountains and inhabited by deeply conservative and suspicious tribes. The Islamic leaders (the imamate) of the Ibadi sect dwelt within this region, with power bases in Nizwa and Rustaq. Finally, there is the realm of southern Oman, which has a different tribal culture, language and history to the rest of Oman.³

¹ Until the mid-twentieth century ‘Oman’ was used to refer only to the interior. Hence, after the defeat of Imam Ghalib, Sultan Said bin Taimur called himself Sultan of Muscat and Oman.

² Interview with DL 2014.

³ McBrierty, V. & Al-Zubair, M. (2004). *Oman: Ancient Civilization: Modern Nation*. Dublin: Trinity College Press.

The town of Salalah on the ancient Red Sea trading route and even the climate, which has its own monsoon season, make it hard to believe that this is the same country.

THE FORMATION OF OMANI ISLAM

Islam has a long history in Oman going right back to the time of the Prophet. Delegations from Oman visited Mecca as early as 622 BC:

*Ibn Sa'ad records how an Omani party visited Mecca straight after the victory of the Muslims over the Quraysh. Historian and geographer al-Ya'qubi mentions two separate Omani delegations from the tribes of Thumala and Hidan, leaving Oman in 622 BC and travelling to Mecca to meet the Prophet to request information on the new religion in order to assist them in the decision to convert. ... Similarly, leaders of a number of tribes were sent by the al-Julanda rulers of Oman in order to request help for Omanis who wanted to learn more about the new religion.*⁴

One must note that it was unlikely that the delegates mentioned earlier were representing Oman as an entity, for at that time it was fractured into tribal rule. Rather it was more an intervention by a local tribe which eventually resulted in the Prophet appointing Amr bin al-As as his ambassador, who then invited the Omani tribes to embrace Islam. After a widespread consultation with tribal leaders and leading scholars, which included the Christian Theologian (Ka'b bin Barsha al-Tahi),⁵ the tribes agreed to convert. One political outcome of this decision was that it enabled the tribes to unite and, with the assistance of the Muslim armies, evict the Zoroastrian Persian troops from their region.⁶

Following the death of the Prophet, another Omani delegation sent by the al-Julanda princes travelled to Mecca in order to pledge their allegiance to the new Caliph, Abu Bakr.⁷ This allegiance allowed the al-Julanda princes to draw on military support, which eventually crushed their

⁴ Jones, J. & Ridout, N. (2012). *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Page 45.

⁵ Who was this theologian? Is the al-Tahi tribe known to be Christian? Where did they come from?

⁶ Wilkinson, J.C. (1979). "The Origins of the Omani State". *Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics*. Hopwood, D. (ed). London: George Allen & Unwin. Pages 76–83.

⁷ Jones, J. & Ridout, N. (2012). *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Page 48.

opposition, ending with a decisive battle in Dibba which paved the way for them to rule over a large section of Oman.

Later on, as the Islamic Empire expanded, Caliph ‘Umar ordered his general ‘Uthman to take Omani troops to the north end of the Gulf and confront the Persians there. The Omani historian al-Awtabi recorded that following the success of the campaigns against the Persians, several of the troops, especially from the Azd tribe, settled in Basra. One of them went on to be appointed a judge for the area.⁸ This explains the presence of the Omani tribes in Basra when the rebellion against Caliph Ali took place, which subsequently resulted in the seeds of the Ibadi theology being planted, travelling with the Azd tribe back to Oman when they fled from the civil war.

IBADI ISLAM

Landen describes how the primary fracturing of Islam took place within 30 years of the Prophet Muhammad’s death. The Sunni/Shi’a split was caused by a dispute concerning succession to the Caliphate. The Shi’a believed that the caliphate should be hereditary and that the mantle of leadership should be passed on from generation to generation in the House of Muhammad. They traced the bloodline to the descendants of Ali. The Sunni preferred to adopt the tribal custom of their time and appoint a leader from within a leading tribe who was known for their leadership quality and status—in practice this meant the Quraysh tribe (which the prophet Muhammad belonged to). In opposition to these views were the Khawarij, who believed that any pious Muslim, regardless of tribe or ancestry, could be elected caliph by the vote of the Muslim community. It is from this group that the Ibadis trace their descent.⁹

Landen then maps out how Ibadi Islam arrived in Oman. The Ibadis allegedly received their name from the writings of a moderate Khariji scholar called Abdallah ibn-Ibad who was based in what is now Iraq. Some claim, however, that the term Ibadi is derived from the Arabic word for ‘white’ or ‘pure’.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., page 48.

⁹ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 42.

¹⁰ Ibid., page 44. The eminent Ibadi scholar Wilkinson suggests that the term was used as a joke label. Wilkinson, J.C. (2010). *Ibadism: Origins and Early Development in Oman*. Oxford: OUP. Page 153.

The small Ibadi community in Iraq fled due to persecution by the Umayyad Caliph Al-Hajjaj, who was deeply suspicious of the Khawarij. The Ibadi refugees were particularly welcomed in Oman because of tribal ties and because the Omanis themselves were subject to the imperial ambitions of Al-Hajjaj. Up to that time, Oman had enjoyed independent status under the Islamic empire and was ruled by the same Julandi dynasty that predated Islam.¹¹ The resulting struggles against the Umayyad Empire resulted in the Ibadis cementing their alliance with the Julandis and thus their causes became merged. The result was that 'Ibadi Islam became one of the key elements in Omani particularism'.¹²

The Azd tribe and other Omani settlers, in collaboration with the Meccan-based leadership, dominated the economy by securing control over the coastal areas through their increasingly effective navy. Through these means they became dominant traders across the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. This maritime skill was tribal-specific and would lead to economic inequality in the future, resulting in much conflict.

Scholars of Ibadism are largely in consensus that its origins date back to AD 657. According to Khuri,

*this is the year in which the Kharijis rebelled against Ali bin Abu Talib in protest against his agreeing to settle through arbitration his dispute with Mu'awiya (the founder of the Umayyad dynasty) over the caliphate. The Kharijis were Ali's supporters and wanted him to be caliph. To them he was the best qualified.*¹³

The Kharijis considered Ali's loss of the caliphate to the Umayyads as an act of betrayal to both his own cause and their trust: hence the rebellion. The following is a description of the decisive battle which led to the sectarian split:

The battle lasted for weeks—but on its most decisive day, Mu'awiyah had his warriors put pages of the Qur'an on their lances, thus indicating his desire to decide their differences on the basis of the Qur'an. 'Ali reluctantly agreed setting up two generals, one from each side to arbitrate. A group of 'Ali's soldiers,

¹¹ Ibid., page 44.

¹² Ibid., page 45.

¹³ I am indebted to Khuri who provides a comprehensive overview of Omani history in Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books.

mainly of the tribe of Tamim, saw this as elevating the decision of men over that of God and withdrew to a nearby village to protest. Here they elected a fellow soldier, 'Abdullah bin Wahb al-Rasibi as their leader. It was this move which gave the group its name Khawarij, that is to say, the 'seceders'.¹⁴

The Ibadis themselves, on the other hand, do not see their origin in accountable historical incidents or events, limited to time and place; rather, they consider themselves an 'ancient' community rooted in Qur'anic revelations. The Ibadis are emphatic that they do not identify themselves as Kharijites.

It is impossible to overemphasise the role of tribal culture in consolidating the arrival of the Ibadi school in Oman. 'The rise and establishment of the imamate in 793 was facilitated through four messengers from the tribes of Kinda, Bani Smah and the Riyami.'¹⁵ These religious spokesmen united the tribes around the creeds and proved to be a formidable alliance.

TRIBAL INFLUENCES

Thus, the salient factor which emerges from a reading of Ibadi history is the role of tribal allegiances. This is also manifested in the centuries-old conflict between the Qahtani and the Adnani tribes. The Qahtani tribes have a long history and association with Oman and power. As Al-Farsi explains,

[t]he Julanda tribes comes from the Qahtani tribal group which ruled Oman at the time of the Prophet and his four successors ... by the time of the fourth Caliph Ali bin Abi-Talib, Oman had adopted the Ibadi sect and established the imamate in AD 750. ... What is striking is that the choice of Imam was affected by the tribal influence of the Qahtanis who were reluctant to stick purely to the Ibadi notion of selecting the Imam from among the best competitors. ... Therefore, even the first Imamate was a product of tribal culture.¹⁶

One compromise that ensured some periods of harmony between the two major tribal groupings was that although the imams mainly came from the Qahtani sector, the base from which the imams ruled from was

¹⁴ Skinner, R.F. (1992). *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press. Page 19.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁶ Al-Farsi, S. (2013). *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman*. London: I.B. Tauris. Page 47.

agreed to be in Nizwa, which was a stronghold of the Adnani tribes. Nizwa was strategically located and allowed easy access to all the major tribes. This harmonious arrangement came to an end in AD 892, when a disagreement over the ability of the current Imam to perform his duties (due to old age) led to outright rebellion, and Rustaq thus came to be seen as an alternative seat of power for the old Imam while a new one was appointed for Nizwa. Historians refer to this incident as the Nizari/Yemeni conflict (although it was in essence between the Qahtani and Adnani tribes). It proved to be a pivotal moment in Omani history, and it is the backdrop of a long and sustained feud between the two tribal blocks.

For several hundred years, then, the history of Oman is a cyclical series of conflicts between these two tribal confederations, with imams rising and falling in steady succession.¹⁷ It is in this unstable context of intertribal rivalry that the Portuguese were able to assert control so quickly.

The brutality of the Portuguese regime succeeded in uniting the Omani tribes against a common enemy. A campaign was launched against the 'Christian' foreigners on the coastline. Later on, in the sixteenth century, a Ya'aribah leader from the Qahtani tribe succeeded in expelling the Portuguese from the coastal towns and began a new imamate.

Finally, the Portuguese Christians were forced out of Muscat in 1650, initiating a century of rule in which the Ya'aribah tribe worked to unify both the Oman interior and the coastal tribes through management and shrewd distribution of maritime trade income. Their aspirations in this regard were constantly frustrated by a myriad of factors: tribal rivalry, entrance into international alliances, attempts to administer a chaotic empire with no administrative structures, management of the new wealth, navigation of expectations from hostile and subject tribes and having to constantly fend off criticism that they were abandoning the theological principles of Ibadi Islam. Indeed, the emergence of a dynasty was in itself a refutation of one of the core values of Ibadi government.¹⁸

Tribalism was also the cause of another war between the Ghafiri (Adnani) and the Hinawi (Qahtani) tribes when an Adnani sheikh seized the role of imam. This conflict split Oman for three centuries. This divide was reflected in the geographical territories held by the different tribes,

¹⁷ Badger, G.P. (trans). (2010). *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman by Salil Ibn Razik*. Whitefish, Montana: Reprint by Kessinger Publications. Wilkinson, J.C. (2010). *Ibadism: Origins and Early Development in Oman*. Oxford: OUP.

¹⁸ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

with the Hinawis holding on to the coastal port towns and the Ghafiris dominating the interior. Al-Farsi is quick to point out that the tribal/geographical map was more complex and nuanced. He said, ‘this geographic positionality should not be allowed to obscure the fact that tribalism in Oman depends initially and crucially on blood ties and then on the political coalitions and tribal alliances (*shaff*) that tribes are able to command.’¹⁹

THE NEW DYNASTY OF OMAN

Ahmed bin Said Al-Busaidi (from the Qahtani tribe), founded the current ruling dynasty. He succeeded in driving out the Persians who had invaded Oman during the intertribal wars and was consequently elected to the role of imam.²⁰

Ironically (because one of the core virtues of Ibadi Islam is simplicity in lifestyle), the interior tribes rebelled against the imam because of his success at expanding the Omani economic empire, which included the lucrative trade from Zanzibar. Whilst the Imamate clearly profited from this enterprise, its reluctance to share this wealth equitably with the tribal leaders from the interior resulted in a showdown between the two biggest tribal confederations in Oman: the Bani Ghafiri who trace their origins from a northern Adnani tribe and the Bani Hinna (Hinawi) who look to Yemen and the province of Qahtani as their ancestral heartland. The incessant fighting and hostility between these two groups weakened them to such an extent that a third, smaller tribe was able to enter and seize the power of the imamate, a tribe which has continued to control that institution up to the present day. Once the Al Bu Said (a tribe who hail from Rustaq) gained power they moved quickly to establish a structure through which power was mediated. This was the structure which the American missionaries navigated when they entered into Oman in 1896.

They arrived in the wake of an earlier journey made by Samuel Zwemer in 1891. On that journey he met with Sultan Faysal bin Turki and they

¹⁹ Al-Farsi, S. (2013). *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman*. London: I.B. Tauris. Page 53.

²⁰ Said b Sultan (ruled 1806–1856) separated the roles of Ruler and Imam, allowing his uncle Said b Ahmad to continue as Imam after he (Said b Sultan) became Ruler. It’s true that the British often called him ‘Imaum’ (sic), but wrongly. I haven’t seen evidence that he ever called himself Imam. Official British correspondence called him Sultan from about 1839. (Personal correspondence from Stuart Laing. 2019).

agreed that there was a need for a medical work to exist in Oman. As a result of that visit, Zwemer wrote to the American Mission in New York in order to recruit workers to help in medical and educational ministries in Oman.²¹

The mechanisms which the sultans have employed to keep the unity of Oman are 'the army, the waly, and the tribal sheikhs. The country was essentially an interior tribal agglomeration superimposed on a coastal trading community and held in suspense by the mobility of the army and personality of the sultan.'²²

The aforementioned structures were masterfully employed by the first of the Al Bu Said dynasty, Ahmed bin Said, who led the rebellion in 1749—and won. Under his rule, Oman witnessed a pivotal shift in the economy from a simple trade and barter agricultural system to a sophisticated and international maritime industry.

It is suggested that the ruling families set the cultural climate for the level of tolerance.²³ For example, when the American Missionaries first came, they found the traditional doors of hospitality firmly closed. Cantine recalls his arrival in Muscat and the difficulty he had in finding a home to rent:

*[H]ouses of a sort were plentiful and I was not worried until several owners of various properties on different pretexts refused us as tenants. I asked an Arab friend what was the matter. He replied, 'Don't you know? The governor has posted notices that no one in the city is allowed under severe penalties to rent a house to the American missionaries?'*²⁴

²¹ Funsch, L.P. (2015). *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Page 91.

²² Skeet, I. (1992). *Oman: Politics and Development*. London: Macmillan. Page 158.

²³ Herb, M. (1999). *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*. New York: State University of New York Press. Crystal, J. (1995). *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Gause, F.G., III. (1994). *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press. Netton, I.R. (1986). *Arabia and the Gulf: From Traditional Society to Modern States*. London: Croom Helm.

²⁴ Zwemer, S. & Cantine, J. (1938). *The Golden Milestone: Reminiscences of Pioneer Days Fifty Years Ago in Arabia*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company. Page 58.

The reason for this became apparent when the missionaries realised that

at the time the Sultan was dealing with a serious armed insurrection led by an imam from Rustaq who was particularly incensed by the Sultan showing favour to the 'Christian foreigners'.²⁵

THE GROWTH OF TRADE

The discovery of the Cape sea route by European powers in 1498 led to a flourishing maritime trading empire between India and the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and the British. With the aid of an Omani navigator Ahmad bin Mujid (said to have inspired the legend of Sinbad the Sailor), the Omanis found themselves well positioned as a staging post between India and the West.

By this time, oceanic trade had become so active that a new merchant class began to gradually arise in Oman. The merchants were the first to support Imam Ahmad in his attempts to expand trade between the continents. A series of sea ports on the East African coast began to rise with an obvious Omani or Yemeni accent. Zanzibar, famous for its cloves, reveals clear evidence of the Omani tradition in East Africa.²⁶

The prosperity experienced by Oman during this time (1750–1800) was directly due to the Omani seamen who sailed the trading routes from India to East Africa, the rise of the merchant class who capitalised on the declining fortunes of Persia and the strong leadership of Al Bu Said who promoted trade and kept the tribal alliances in a state of equilibrium. The religious climate on the coast seemed to have been shaped by the pragmatic demands of trade, thus leading to a 'moderate' Ibadi Islam which allowed 'the protection and favourable treatment of all merchants, sailors and strangers by the Muscat authorities. A uniform customs tariff was charged on imports loaded in the city and traders knew they need fear no further demands for payments.'²⁷ Perhaps it was the memory of this religious tolerance which allowed for the eventual accommodation of the

²⁵ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 392.

²⁶ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. Page 116.

²⁷ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 61.

Christians who were to arrive later. It was also estimated that five-eighths of all Gulf trade passed through Muscat, including the lucrative coffee trade.²⁸ It was as close as any ruler would get to achieving economic hegemony.²⁹ Perhaps it was at this time that precedents for a future rentier state were normalised in tribal experience and customs.

The successor to Ahmed bin Saif was his son Said, who took on the mantle of imam after his father died in 1783. However, his rule was to be short-lived when his own son, Hamad, seized the leadership of the imamate after his father had only been in power for 3 years. Yet he spared his father and even allowed him to exercise religious authority. In order to undermine any potential rebellion from supporters of his father, *Hamad bin Said immediately relocated his power base from Rustaq, in the interior of Oman, over to the coastal centre of trade, Muscat.* In doing this, he consolidated the shift in economy from subsistence agriculture to world trade. The shift of rule to the coast also led to a significant shift in the religious and political spheres which remains to this day.

*Hamad had for the first time separated the imamate and the sultanate, keeping his father as imam in Rustaq while appointing himself as 'sultan' of Oman in Muscat. This was the first instance of the Ibadis differentiating between the two authorities—the rule of religion and the government of the sultan or emir.*³⁰

This bifurcation of religious and political power continued under the rule of Hamad's uncle, Sultan bin Ahmed. Hamad (who died in 1792) was survived by his father who was still acting as imam in Rustaq. Sultan bin Ahmed adopted the term 'sayyid' (implying he was a descendant of the Caliph Ali, a blatant attempt to seek religious justification for his power) as a title distinct from imam. His successors adopted the title 'Sayyid' and it became a signifier for the ruling family. At this time Oman was effectively run by three brothers. In the interior, Said continued to hold sway as the Imam, and he commanded allegiance from the conservative Ibadi tribes. Sultan's second brother, Qais, governed Sohar and the Batina region while Sultan himself operated from Muscat as the seat of commercial power, overseeing the taxation of all the goods which passed through the harbour.

²⁸ Ibid., page 61.

²⁹ Ibid., page 63.

³⁰ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. Page 116.

In 1821, Imam Said bin Ahmed died, leading to a potential crisis within the family. As the role of imam is one which is traditionally chosen by the tribes, Said bin Sultan could not simply co-opt the title 'Imam' for himself. Yet he could not risk an outsider becoming the imam as this would be a potential threat to his own power. The solution was simple. He ensured that no election took place. So, for 50 years the position of imam remained vacant. This was the first time since AD 793 that there had been no imam in Oman. What was surprising is that the tribes did not clamour for a replacement. Their compliance in the absence of an imam could be understood as a consequence of the Ibadi theological doctrine, which allows for the concealment of the imam, known as the state of *kitman*.³¹

With so much power invested between the brothers, who had separated Oman into different spheres of influence, it is perhaps not surprising that family troubles came to the forefront, resulting in a series of armed conflicts between tribes who were loyal to one brother or another. In the end, it was a nephew of Sultan who overthrew him and seized for himself the title of 'Sayyid'. His reign was short-lived and was brought to an end by the son of the previous ruler, Said bin Sultan, who rapidly reclaimed his father's power and maintained his family's dynasty. He proved to be a capable ruler and, according to Khuri, 'he could have declared himself both imam and sultan had he so wished. However, he seemed to have had much less interest in the imamate than in the more lucrative sultanate that controlled local and international commerce and trade. Indeed, Said used to spend most of his time commuting between Muscat and Zanzibar to supervise his business empire.'³²

After the death of Said bin Sultan in 1856, his successful legacy was parcelled out to two of his sons and his nephew. Thuwaini bin Said ruled in Muscat, his brother Majid oversaw Zanzibar and Azzan bin Qais, the nephew, ruled over the interior from Rustaq. The unity which Oman had enjoyed under the rule of Sultan bin Ahmed came to an end when Thuwaini attempted to oust his cousin Azzan from Rustaq. Thuwaini had committed the unforgivable sin of allying himself with Wahhabi troops who were at that time based in Buraimi. The Wahhabis, who were bitterly opposed to Ibadi doctrine and saw it part of their mission to convert the Omanis to the Wahhabi doctrine, were only too glad to join forces with Thuwaini in order to expand their own influence. Their failure to defeat

³¹ Ibid., page 87, for a fuller explanation of this doctrine.

³² Ibid., page 117.

Azzan at Rustaq led to the Wahhabi discarding Thuwaini in favour of his son, Salim bin Thuwaini. He, with the support of the Wahhabis, overthrew his father in 1866 and declared himself ‘Sayyid’. His triumph was short-lived. His unholy alliance with the Wahhabis so incensed the Ibadi sensibilities of the interior tribes that they united under the leadership of Azzan and expelled Salim from Muscat in 1868.

With the routing of the Wahhabi troops and the consolidation of rule under Azzan, the Ibadi tribes restored the imamate and elected Azzan as the first imam after a 50-year gap. Azzan had restored Ibadi pride and demonstrated clear leadership and piety in ridding the country of Wahhabi influence. It was not to last long.

Meanwhile in Muscat, with the encouragement of Azzan, the chief Qadi (a judge), Khalili, imposed a strict interpretation of Ibadi Islam with the aim of restoring the religious purity of Omani society. Alston and Laing spell out the implications of this time:

Here the difference became apparent between the maritime and trading society of the coast, with its international outlook and mixed ethnic composition, and the austere ethos of the folk from the interior. Khalili was supported by groups of *muttawwi'un*, who enforced the rules against dancing, the use of liquor or drugs, and music and drums. In some cases, violence was used against Hindu traders, despite their notionally being protected as British Indian citizens. The port’s business which was in decline anyway was further reduced as members of the Indian community took their business elsewhere. All this had a direct effect on the stability of Imam Azzan’s Government. Reduced commerce led to a lower tax revenue. Khalili, in charge of Government finance, attempted to boost income by confiscation of property, with predictable consequences for the esteem in which the regime was held.³³

Here is a clear instance where religious beliefs impacted the economy. In this case, the lack of tolerance resulted in the destabilisation of the regime. The collapsing economy resulted in an opportunity for the Ghafiri tribes, who were still smarting from their defeat at the hands of Azzan, to seek new alliances.

Still smarting from their defeat, the Wahhabis plotted their revenge and succeeded in playing on the age-old feud between the tribal confederations.

³³ Alston, R. & Laing, S. (2012). *Unshook Till the End of Time. A History of Relations Between Britain & Oman 1650–1970*. London: Gilgamesh Publishing. Page 151.

In 1870, the Ghafiri tribes supported by a gleeful Wahhabi force stormed Rustaq and succeeded in dethroning Azzan. With the death of Azzan, once again the role of imam became vacant and, with no clear contender commanding the allegiance of the Ibadi interior tribes, the power struggles for the imamate quietened down.

Meanwhile on the coast, Sayyid Turki bin Said bin Sultan came to power in Muscat and was later succeeded by his son Faisal in 1888. It was during the latter's reign that the American missionaries first arrived, seeking to establish the Arabian Mission. Indirectly, the missionaries were to be a cause of dissent from Faisal's subjects.

This time the rebellion came from the other tribal confederation—the Bani Hinna tribes, who remained deeply committed to the Ibadi doctrine. However, according to Khuri,³⁴ the main reason for their revolt against Faisal was economic misery. Their sense of justice resulted in a large part of Muscat being attacked and destroyed, almost succeeding in the termination of Faisal's reign.

The first American missionaries provide a riveting eye account of this time. Shortly after his arrival, Peter Zwemer found himself in the midst of conflict between Sultan Faisal and the interior tribes. He wrote:

In 1894 a rebellious sheikh invaded Muscat. 'On the morning of February 13th, we were awakened by cannonading from the forts and volleys of rifle shots in the streets mingled with the fierce yells of Bedouin warriors, and cries of fear from the women and children. ... For ten days we remained in the Mission house with doors and windows barred against the stray bullets that whizzed through the streets. ... After twenty five days of guerrilla warfare, during which perhaps 300 were killed, neither party making any advance, peace was concluded between the Sultan and the invading Sheikh by the payment of a sum of money. Before leaving, however, the invaders set fire to the bazaar and innumerable date leaf huts of the poor class, and the soldiers of both parties freely looted the entire town. Our Bible shop was opened and looted and our colporteur was robbed [] of his clothing.'³⁵

Recognising the source of their anger, Faisal averted disaster by addressing their grievances through simply paying them off with gifts of money and treasure. This bought him peace for some 18 years. He used this time

³⁴ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books.

³⁵ NA/AC, 1895. 13: 9–10.

to develop the fortunes of Oman and capitalise on the wealth of Zanzibar, going there personally to oversee its trade and governance.

Meanwhile in the interior, the Wahhabi influence in Rustaq meant that Ibadi aspirations for an imamate returned to the traditional centre of Ibadism in the interior, Nizwa. In 1895, the tribes elected a new imam, Said bin Khamis al Kharrousi. He was a respected Sheikh and scholar and, in 1913, he succeeded in arousing the zealous ire of the Ibadis against the sultan by

*accusing Faysal of corruption and blasphemy, and committing religiously prohibited acts including the importation of wine and tobacco, mixing with, and concluding deals with non-believers (Christians) and being unable to speak Arabic correctly and therefore not able to understand the Qur'an.*³⁶

The last jibe about language hit home. Faisal had spent so much time in Zanzibar, his Arabic was notably flawed. Instead he spoke Swahili, the lingua franca of East Africa. Clearly the interior tribes of Oman saw one of the theological dictates of Ibadi Islam as not allowing trade with non-Muslims, and anyone unable to speak the holy language of Arabic was definitely suspect.

Al Kharrousi led the rebels, who first consolidated their hold on the interior villages of Oman and, having declared al Kharrousi the Imam of the Faithful, the troops proceeded to march from Nizwa to the coast. Were it not for the intervention of the British fleet, they would have taken the coastal port cities as well. Sultan Faisal's use of British military might against the interior tribes only served to inflame anti-Christian sentiment.

This tribal unrest against Muscat was to be reignited again and again. The main trigger for rebellion was the disparity in wealth between Muscat, the centre of trade and commerce, and the interior, which engaged mainly in subsistence production. This cycle of unrest was to continue for 7 years, ending only with the death of al Kharrousi, who was assassinated by a zealous Wahhabi warrior.

The next elected imam was Said bin Khalfan al Khalili. He proved to be a more temperate and diplomatic imam than al Kharrousi and demonstrated this through a pragmatic treaty with the successor to Sultan Faisal—his son Taimur. The details of the agreement included economic

³⁶ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. Page 117.

benefits and the agreement that ‘the sultan would not impose tariffs on goods entering Muscat from the interior, nor restrict the movements of Omanis coming into the flourishing coastal cities, the imam pledged in return not to attack or loot the villages or towns that lay under the sultan’s authority’.³⁷

This treaty proved to be a pivotal moment in Oman’s history and came to be known as the treaty of Seeb (or Sib). It set the tone for future relationships between the imam and the sultan and formalised mutual recognition with prescribed understandings of each other’s roles. The imam, in his role as representing the conservative Ibadi tribes of the interior, was properly representing the sheikhs and, as such, this treaty can be understood as an agreement between the leaders of the interior tribes and the sultan.

In 1932, Sultan Taimur died and was succeeded by his son Said. At that time the ageing Imam al-Khalili was still alive but losing influence amongst the tribes. The united coalition which formed the basis of the Seeb Treaty was unravelling and fracturing, and once again members of the Bani Hinna confederation saw a chance to seize a platform for power. Under the wily leadership of Isa bin Saleh, the authority of the imam began to be undermined. The imam was frustrated by the political machinations of Isa bin Saleh, who may have succeeded in completely usurping the imam had it not been for his premature death.

Seizing the moment, Imam al-Khalili³⁸ imposed his authority across the interior and, still smarting from the taunts of Isa bin Saleh that he was not doing enough to uphold the values of Ibadi Islam, he proceeded to demonstrate his newly gained powers and commitment to uphold the conservative values of the region.

For example, he demonstrated his autonomy by forbidding oil excavators from entering the area he controlled on the pretext that they, being Christian, might defile the purity of the Ibadi land. There is a debate as to whether this was a gesture indicating a rejection of the sultan’s government rather than an obedience to the dictates of his religion.

When he died in 1954, a new imam was elected in Nizwa. Little was he to know that the imamate was about to come to an end. Ghalib bin Ali’s appointment to the imamate was widely regarded as a reflection of his

³⁷ Ibid., page 118.

³⁸ The al-Khalili family are still the leading theologians of Ibadism in Oman. The Grand Mufti today is from the al-Khalili tribe.

brother's influence. Talib bin Ali was the tribal chief who was appointed governor of Rustaq. Talib was ambitious, and under the guise of his religion would frequently challenge the authority of the sultan in Muscat. Like Imam al-Khalili, one way he sought to assert his autonomy was by opposing the oil explorers who were being given permits to drill for oil in the interior. Talib would only relent to their presence after he had secured from the sultan an agreement in which he would receive a larger share of the profit from any oil discovery. His interference in the sultan's affairs eventually led to an outright confrontation and in 1959, Sultan Said bin Taimur, with the military support of the British (especially the Royal Air Force), ended the passive aggression of the imam and established his rule over the interior. This was an ominous end to the imamate. Ultimately, an alliance between the 'Christian West' and the sultan deposed the imam in the interests of guarding the oil industry.

The imamate was once more in a state of *kitman*, and has been so since 1959. Now, 50 years later, with no sign of the imamate being revived, one wonders if it ever will be and, if so, how would it function under current government structures?

The overall impression from reading the limited sources about Ibadi Islam is that, generally, whenever Christians are referred to in the rhetoric of the imam, they are described as a negative and unwanted presence in the land who threaten Ibadi hegemony. Christians were seen in terms of being linked with foreign power and in particular the British treaties with the sultanate were regarded with great anxiety by the imams (and with some justification as the British took over the East African trade, especially Zanzibar), thus acting as a trigger for the 1868 rebellion led by Imam Azzan.³⁹

Yet, there were honourable men amongst the British who were seeking to encourage the Sultan to invest in beneficial institutions which would enrich his people. Proposals, such as building schools, were met with resistance from the Sultan Said who said to the British Secretary of State in 1958: 'And what will my people do once educated? Apart from traditional pursuits such as farming or fishing there will be nothing, generally speaking, for them to do.'⁴⁰ Then, the Sultan clinched his argument by pointing

³⁹ Al-Farsi, S. (2013). *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman*. London: I.B. Tauris. Page 7.

⁴⁰ Beasant, J. (2013). *Oman: The True Life Drama and Intrigue of an Arab State*. Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing. Page 129.

out to the British that they ‘don’t know their own history. You built schools for the masses in India. And then look what happened. Once [they were] educated they threw you out!’⁴¹

Similarly, the same Sultan⁴² rejected the proposal of building more hospitals on the grounds that ‘this is a very poor country, which can only support a small population. At present many children die in infancy and so the population does not increase. If we build clinics many more will survive, but for what? To starve?’⁴³

IBADI THEOLOGY

One of the main challenges for this study is that there is little material available for analysis which can speak definitively from an Ibadi perspective. The Ibadis use many of the *tafsir* which are used historically by the Sunni. For example, ‘the commentary of the Koran used by the Ibadis is that of Zamakshari, who was of the Mutazilite sect of Khawarij.’⁴⁴

In speaking of their sources of authority, Jamal Nasir, an international lawyer and barrister, explains that the Ibadis

*base their doctrine on the Qurán, the Sunna, and the consensus. They extend the Sunna beyond the sayings and deeds of the prophet to include those of the first two Patriarchal Caliphs, Abu Bakr and Omar. To those three over-riding sources they add analogy and inference where no text exists.*⁴⁵

Albayrak and al-Shu'eli note: ‘of the major works of *usul al-tafsir* (methodology of Qur’anic exegesis) recommended for students at the Islamic Studies Institute in Muscat, Oman, there is not a single source written by

⁴¹ Ibid., page 129.

⁴² A more tempered portrayal of Sultan Said is found in Alston and Laing, where they state that the ‘Sultan was not necessarily the cynical and uninterested ruler he has sometimes been made out to be’. Instead they argue that he was ‘strongly influenced by his wish to sustain Oman as a tribally organised society, and by long practised financial prudence’. Alston, R. & Laing, S. (2012). *Unshook Till the End of Time. A History of Relations Between Britain & Oman 1650–1970*. London: Gilgamesh Publishing. Page 251.

⁴³ Ibid., page 129.

⁴⁴ Sirhan, I.S. (trans by Ross, E.C.) (1984). *Annals of Oman*. Cambridge: The Oleander Press. Page 114.

⁴⁵ Nasir, J.J. (1986). *The Islamic Law of Personal Status*. London: Graham Trotman. Page 9.

an Ibadi scholar.⁴⁶ They suggest the reason for this is the Ibadi preoccupation with juristic concerns. They seem to confirm a prevailing view that the Ibadis have no distinctive contribution to the Islamic sciences and drew heavily on earlier Sunni sources.

This view is flatly rejected by Ennami,⁴⁷ who demonstrated that there were early Ibadi sources and supported the view that the Ibadis were the first to put the traditions of the companions and followers of the prophet into writing. He also draws attention to a growing corpus of Ibadi literature.

Some of the leading Ibadi scholars found in the literature are Salih ibn-Ali, Said ibn-Nasir, Ali ibn-Muhammad, Hilal ibn-Zahir and Abdallah ibn-Humayd al-Salimi.⁴⁸

So, what is distinctive about Ibadi *tafsir*? According to Albayrak and al-Shu'eli in their comprehensive review of the 'Ibadi Approach to the Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis', their first observation and surprise is that there is very little *tafsir* that exists in writing. In trying to discover why this is the case they conclude that

*Ibadis were more interested in social development and reform of society and so they focussed on more concrete disciplines such as theology and jurisprudence. The political unrest which prevailed during the formation of early Ibadi theology meant that they were struggling against opponents and were under enormous pressure and so did not have time to compose exegesis; and when they did write exegesis their readership was small and that they were too poor to publish what they had written and that there were natural disasters (sources were lost in fire and flood and so on). In addition they mention that there is no Hanafi or Maliki jurisprudence and that there is no Hanafi or Maliki exegesis, thus exegetical works belong to everyone, and so Ibadis prefer to use other exegesis instead of wasting effort on duplication. A more honest answer was provided by the Grand Mufti of Oman when he admitted that Ibadis simply neglected this discipline.*⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Albayrak, I. & al-Shu'eli, S. (2015). "The Ibadi Approach to the Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis." *Muslim World*. Vol 105, No 2. Page 163.

⁴⁷ Ennami, A.K. (2008). *Studies in Ibadism*. Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

⁴⁸ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 372.

⁴⁹ Albayrak, I. & al-Shu'eli, S. (2015). "The Ibadi Approach to the Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis." *Muslim World*. Vol 105, No 2. Page 193.

The Ibadi school is the only school in Islam today which holds on to the concept that the Qur'an is created as opposed to uncreated (the view held by the other schools), although this conviction is rarely stated as boldly as mentioned earlier. This flows from their conviction (previously outlined by the Mu'tazilite school in Baghdad during the eighth to tenth centuries) that only God is eternal and that they commit the sin of *shirk* if anything outside of God is given a divine attribute. Ibadi scholars in the past have revealed their awareness of the human contribution to the compilation of the Qur'an, and they point to the 'Uthmanic Recension, doctrines such as abrogation of earlier revelations by later verses, and variant readings'.⁵⁰ However, the subject of the nature of the Qur'an is not a dominant issue in theology for Ibadi scholars. Rather than immerse themselves in a messy dispute (which would carry parallels to the Christological debates over the status of Jesus' nature in the early church), they simply declare that the Qur'an is revealed by God and avoid divisive debate.⁵¹

Another distinctive trait of Ibadi Islam is that the call to Dawah is muted compared to other Islamic traditions. The Omani faith was described as 'a strict and exclusionary one, since one cannot convert to Ibadism but must be born into it'.⁵² Indeed, a quick look at some of the theological texts of Ibadi Islam shows that Dawah is absent from the discussions and not even mentioned in the index.⁵³ The anthropologist Limbert⁵⁴ noted the importance of genealogy in traditional Omani society and a deep awareness of social status and class which determines marital choices. All of this highlights that conversion of outsiders to Ibadi Islam is

⁵⁰ Ibid., page 166.

⁵¹ Ibid., page 165.

⁵² Bird, C. (2010). *The Sultan's Shadow: One Family's Rule at the Crossroads of East and West*. New York: Random House. Page 175. This quote is taken from a historical study of Oman's rule in Zanzibar and is set against the discussion of the awkward attempts of the Omanis and Swahilis to socially integrate.

⁵³ Al-Khalili, A.H. (2002). *The Overwhelming Truth: A Discussion of Some Key Concepts in Islamic Theology*. Muscat: Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. Ennami, A.K. (2008). *Studies in Ibadhism*. Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. Al-Salimi, A. (2014). *Early Ibadi Theology: Six Kalam Texts by 'Abd Allah b. Yazid al Fazrai* (Islamic History and Civilization Series). Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers. Al-Salimi, A. & Madelung, W. (2011). *Early Ibadi Literature: Abu l-Mundhir Bashir b. Muhammad b. Mahbub. Kitab al-Rasfi l-Tawhid, Kitab al-Muharaba and Sira*. Morgenlandes: Harrassowitz Verlag.

⁵⁴ Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. See the chapter on "Becoming Bahlawi" pp. 134–164.

not a desirable phenomenon and consequently there is far more focus on Islamic laws dealing with property and inheritance issues rather than the propagation of the faith.

This lack of interest in evangelism also colours their relationships with the Christians. A historical account of a meeting between the evangelical American consul to Zanzibar and Sayyid Said highlights how Richard Waters, the consul, attempted to ‘convert’ the ruler to Christianity. Although the sultan had no intention to convert, he nonetheless admired the Christian faith of Waters and ‘allowed him to distribute Bibles and Christian tracts amongst his people knowing full well that they would fall on deaf ears’.⁵⁵

This lack of Ibadi evangelistic zeal is part of what makes Ibadi Islam more tolerant than other forms. When it came to Christians, the Ibadi Muslims focused more on trade issues and avoiding conversion to the Christian faith.

What does emerge from surveying Ibadi texts is that there seems to be little focus on the Christian community. One contemporary Ibadi book⁵⁶ promised a whole chapter on the theology of Muslim-Christian relations. In the end it turned out to be a review of a Western published book on early Islamic anti-Christian polemics.⁵⁷ Other accessible published Ibadi works show that the main concern surrounding the nature of the Qur’an was whether hell was an eternal punishment or not and the methodology of interpretation.⁵⁸ The dates of the latter publication show how recently English translations are trickling through. Perhaps the most authentic work is the translation of the *Epistle of Salim ibn Dhakwan*, an eighth-century commentary of Ibadi theology.⁵⁹ A comprehensive survey of Ibadi

⁵⁵ Bird, C. (2010). *The Sultan’s Shadow. One Family’s Rule at the Crossroads of East and West*. New York: Random House. Page 161.

⁵⁶ Al-Maawali, M.S.S. (2016). *Articles on Ibadi Studies*. Oman: Self-published.

⁵⁷ Thomas, D. (1992). *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁸ Ennami, A.K. (2008). *Studies in Ibadhism*. Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. Al-Khalili, A.H. (2002). *The Overwhelming Truth: A Discussion of Some Key Concepts in Islamic Theology*. Muscat: Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. Al-Salimi, A. & Madelung, W. (2011). *Early Ibadi Literature: Abu l-Mundhir Bashir b. Muhammad b. Mahbub. Kitab al-Rasfi l-Tawhid, Kitab al-Muharaba and Sira*. Morgenlandes: Harrassowitz Verlag.

⁵⁹ Crone, P. & Zimmernann, F. (2001). *The Epistle of Salim ibn Dhakwan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

literature reveals that much remains within the Arabic language.⁶⁰ Publications in English include Wilkinson,⁶¹ Hoffman⁶² and Gaiser,⁶³ and in the majority of these texts there is little reference to Christianity or Christians. That which exists has been gleaned from combing the mentioned texts and others.

IBADI COMMENTARY ON CHRISTIANS

One of the challenges for the contemporary scholar is accessing Ibadi texts and these are slowly entering into academic circles. In a collection of very early Ibadi theological treatises, written by the Omani theologian Abu l-Mundhir Bashir bin Muhammad bin Mahbub (died around AD 908), there is virtually no mention of the Christian community or faith. The only reference to them is in passing comments on enemies and dhimmis. Rather, his preoccupation is with inter-Muslim alliances, debates and conflicts. Where he alludes to non-Muslims, his stance reflects a bellicose attitude towards external, non-Muslim enemies who are seen to be a military threat to the House of Islam. Yet he also allows non-Muslims to be partners in trade and diplomacy. He also allows for non-Muslims to assist Muslims in warfare, even against (wayward) Muslim enemies.⁶⁴

NUR AL-DIN

The most prominent Ibadi scholar at the turn of the twentieth century was known by the honorific title Nur al-Din (light of the faith) Al-Salimi. He was born in 1869 near Rustaq and received a traditional religious education. Although blinded at the age of twelve he continued his studies in Rustaq, a centre of Ibadi scholarship, where he stayed for 22 years. He

⁶⁰ Custers, M.H. (2008). *Al-Ibadiya. A Bibliography. Volume 1. Ibadis of the Mashriq*. Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

⁶¹ Wilkinson, J.C. (1987). *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*. Cambridge: CUP. Wilkinson, J.C. (2010). *Ibadism: Origins and Early Development in Oman*. Oxford: OUP.

⁶² Hoffman, V.J. (2012). *The Essentials of Ibadi Islam*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

⁶³ Gaiser, A.R. (2010). *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers. The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibadi Imamate Traditions*. Oxford: OUP.

⁶⁴ Al-Salimi, A. & Madelung, W. (2011). *Early Ibadi Literature: Abu l-Mundhir Bashir b. Muhammad b. Mahbub. Kitab al-Rasf fi l-Tawhid, Kitab al-Muharaba and Sira*. Morgenlandes: Harrassowitz Verlag.

inspired a revolt against Sultan Faisal in Muscat and succeeded in establishing an imamate in 1913. It is significant that Nur al-Din's popularity as a leader and spokesman was at its peak when the country was in a serious economic crisis, during 1862–1914.⁶⁵ He was a prodigious writer who covered jurisprudence, tafsir and documented Omani history. In 1910, Omanis living in Zanzibar wrote to him to ask for legal and theological guidance on dealing with the encroaching colonialism of the British and others on the East African coast. Nur al-Din's reply contains a robust response to Christian presence in Ibadi territory. He addressed the presence of Christian missionary schools in Zanzibar, Western dress codes, the learning of their languages, trimmed beards and Christian occupation of the land of Islam.⁶⁶

While the forceful language employed by Nur al-Din was primarily directed at the perceived evils of modernism, he certainly used hostile rhetoric when speaking of Christians. He believed that

*Zanzibar was occupied by Christians, by trickery and deception in order to steal the Islamic religion after stealing their lives. Consequently, ignorant and sinful Muslims followed them, adopting their dress, speaking their languages, attending their schools and assisting them in their courts that served injustice.*⁶⁷

The question of missionary schools was particularly relevant to Nur al-Din, as he would have only been too aware of the presence of the American missionaries setting up schools and hospitals in Muscat—a development he held the Sultan responsible for and one of the reasons why he led a rebellion against the Sultan. In his reply to the petitioners in Zanzibar, he drew heavily on the work of Yusuf al-Nabhani,⁶⁸ who had already written about the effect of Christian missionary schools in Palestine and in Beirut. Nur al-Din quoted approvingly from al-Nabhani's work, only disagreeing on his solution, which was to leave the country to the Christians. Instead Nur al-Din called for the Zanzibaris to fight and reclaim the land for

⁶⁵ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pages 96–97.

⁶⁶ Ghazal, A. (2015). "Omani Fatwas and Zanzibari Cosmopolitanism: Modernity and Religious Authority in the Indian Ocean." *Muslim World*. Vol 105. No 2. Page 242.

⁶⁷ Ibid., page 243.

⁶⁸ Al-Nabhani, Y. (1901). *Hadha Kitab Irshad al-Hayan fi Tadbir al-Muslimin min Madaris al-Mubashshirin*. Beirut.

Islam.⁶⁹ In this way, Nur al-Din modelled himself as a warrior leader who saw ‘Christian Europe as the archenemy infiltrating Muslim lands militarily or diplomatically, as well as with a deceitful modernity. This modernity he feared was erasing all boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim.’⁷⁰ In particular, when it came to the issue of Western languages, Nur al-Din was adamant that Arabic be the language of all Omanis as primarily their identity was not an ethnic one but a religious one. The failure to keep Arabic central meant that the Omanis would not have access to the Qur’an and the Hadith.

Finally Nur al-Din reminded the Zanzibaris that the ‘Qur’an and the Sunna prohibit Muslims from co-operating with Christians in their unjust rule’.⁷¹ He in turn was warned about a ‘certain priest travelling in Oman and visiting its villages, documenting Omani geography with the sinister goal of facilitating missionary work inside Oman and carrying books defaming Prophet Muhammed and Islam’.⁷² All of this we know to be true from the annals of the Arabian Christian Mission records.⁷³

The position then at the turn of the twentieth century is that the Imamate

*harboured animosity towards the British and the Europeans who presented a Christian assault on Islam, and due to the decision by the Imamates to maintain their independence of Oman from European rule, or at least the part of Oman under their rule, they were able to keep modernity at bay.*⁷⁴

The theology of Nur al-Din in regard to relations with Christians seems to be more nuanced, as Leonard⁷⁵ highlights:

There is a strong basis for greater inclusion of and peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims which can be found in the late 19th Century jurisprudence of one of the most influential scholars and jurists in Oman from the 1860s through to 1914, Nur al-Din. His jurisprudence continues to influence Ibadi legal

⁶⁹ Ghazal, A. (2015). “Omani Fatwas and Zanzibari Cosmopolitanism: Modernity and Religious Authority in the Indian Ocean.” *Muslim World*. Vol 105. No 2. Page 244.

⁷⁰ Ibid., page 246.

⁷¹ Ibid., page 248.

⁷² Ibid., page 248.

⁷³ Ibid. See chapter on Christianity in Oman.

⁷⁴ Ibid., page 250.

⁷⁵ Leonard, D.R. (2015). “The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman”. *The Muslim World*. Vol 105, No. 2.

opinion in Oman today. ... [H]e advocates in some cases greater coexistence with and protections for Christians, Jews and other non-Muslims living in Oman. Non-Muslims in Nur al-Din's jurisprudence have the right to practice their unique religious laws and doctrines, the right to privacy, the right to a fair trial, the right to travel freely in the Muslim state, and the freedom to lend and borrow. ... [W]hat does seem unique to Nur al-Din's jurisprudence is the right to neighbourhood coexistence. Rather than living in separated ghettos, non-Muslims were allowed to live in the same neighbourhood with Ibadis, to eat together and consider the food of ahl al dhimmi to be halal as long as the meat was slaughtered in observance of the one God. These protections seem to have been extended beyond ahl al dhimmi to include Hindus and other religious minorities. Nur al-Din also advocated for the freedom of dialogue between schools of Islamic jurisprudence and religions.⁷⁶

Another interesting feature of Ibadi Islam emerged in a recently translated document written by the theologian Nur al-Din, who stated that in the absence of a mosque, Ibadi Muslims can pray to Allah in a church or synagogue.⁷⁷

In his recent historical survey of Muscat,⁷⁸ Floor notes that a number of sources commented on the tolerance of the Omanis, which was extended to allow a missionary bishop to preach unimpeded, a Christian to buy a Muslim slave and a Jewish British agent to be shown great respect. This was seen by people in the West as an exciting comment about the unusual tolerance of the Omani Muslims.

Landen too picks up on this remarkable level of tolerance when he notes that

the Ibadis were moderate enough to respect even the legal testimony of a non-Ibadi against an Ibadi. Marriage with non-Ibadis and inheritance by non-Ibadis were also allowed. Christians were regarded with unusual tolerance, it being said that God had called them to their particular belief just as God has called the Muslims to theirs. This tolerant attitude was particularly strong in coastal Oman where there was more contact with foreigners.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ibid., page 275.

⁷⁷ Francesca, E. (2014). *Ibadi Theology: Rereading Sources and Scholarly Works*. Hildesheim. Zurich, New York: Olms-Weidmann.

⁷⁸ Floor, W. (2015). *Muscat: City, Society and Trade*. Washington, DC: Mage Publications. Pages 112–113.

⁷⁹ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 50.

When it comes to Ibadi *tafsir* methodology, the use of *asbab al nuzul* (the historical context of the revelation) is little used.⁸⁰ Rather, Ibadi scholars, such as Khalili, tend to focus on the narratives in the Qur'an as a main source of teaching, defending the repetition of stories in the text as a didactical tool.⁸¹ The use of 'isra'iliyyat literature (Jewish textual sources) to shed light on understanding the Qur'an has a mixed use in Ibadi theology, but is generally shunned by modern Ibadi scholars. As Sheikh Khalili said,

[e]arly exegetes who used 'isra'iliyyat extensively are tolerated today, or at least their position is understandable, but today's commentators should not be tolerated if they use 'isra'iliyyat ... because they go against the data of modern science logic.⁸²

In an email interview with Dr. Suliman bin Ali al Shuaili, a scholar from the College of Islamic Sciences based in Muscat, he refers to the long history of tolerance between the Omani people and people of non-Muslim faith, noting that even the Hindus have temples in Oman. When asked about the theological basis of this tolerance he suggests:

*The biggest factor in the tolerance of the Omanis is the Al Ibadi doctrine, because it is based on justice and the right to equality. It promotes respect for human rights and not harming others. To desist from bad, to believe in word and action and the belief that sin will lead to hell. ... In addition, Ibadi teachers advocate unity and tolerance.*⁸³

It has been commented that there seem to be two Ibadi Islams, in that the coastal cities seem more moderate than the interior in their observance and practice of religion.⁸⁴

Historically, the Ibadis see themselves as maintaining a pure form of Islam.

In their writings they always refer to themselves as "The Muslims". In their view, other so-called Muslims actually had abandoned or were ignorant of the

⁸⁰ Albayrak, I. & al-Shuaili, S. (2015). "The Ibadi Approach to the Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis." *Muslim World*. Vol 105, No 2. Page 171.

⁸¹ Ibid., page 175.

⁸² Ibid., page 176.

⁸³ Interview SAS 2015.

⁸⁴ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pages 39 and 52.

*true path of God but the Ibadis were anxious to reconvert them and did not believe in killing them as did some extreme Kharijite sects.*⁸⁵

One distinctive feature of Ibadism as mentioned earlier is their view that anyone with the right piety and capabilities could be elected to lead the Islamic community as imam. The ideal imam

*was supposed to be a humble, truthful, just and pious man with a good knowledge of his faith and the ability to defend it from all dangers. Imams were primarily either soldiers or scholars, with the latter predominating. An imam was regarded as God's viceroy on earth and as the 'chosen of God'; God's choice was manifested when the proper electoral procedures were used in selecting an imam.*⁸⁶

A positive summation of the tolerance of Ibadi Islam is found in Jones and Ridout's⁸⁷ work in which they tried to analyse the quietist diplomacy of Oman's foreign service.

They argued that the history of Ibadism led to five salient features in the practice of Islam by Omanis. The first is anti-absolutism, which came out of their birth as a movement in opposing the perceived tyrants Caliph Uthman and Caliph Muawiya. Their emphasis on a society which was free of dictator-type leaders became a credal marker. Paradoxically, Jones and Ridout also argue that there is a commitment to avoid political violence, and again, they see this located in Omani opposition to the extreme stance taken by the Khawarij, who justified murdering Muslims who did not subscribe to their own theology. This in turn led to the third feature, being anti-sectarianism. The violent splitting of the Islamic community throughout the short reign of Caliph Ali and the subsequent sects which emerged distressed the Ibadis and resulted in a movement which did not seek conversion from other Muslims to their point of view. The fourth feature then is reservation. Ibadis are encouraged not to be judgemental of other forms of Islam as that would lead them into the danger of sectarianism and confrontation. A quote from the theologian Jabir bin Zaid, who is widely regarded to have voiced the early theology of the Ibadis, outlines some of the principles mentioned earlier:

⁸⁵ Ibid., page 50.

⁸⁶ Ibid., page 47.

⁸⁷ Jones, J. & Ridout, N. (2012). *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Firstly, to avoid any open clash with the authorities and to maintain friendly relations with the rulers. Secondly, not to isolate the members of the movement from the Muslim community (ummah). Thirdly, to continue teaching people Traditions and Futya (legal opinion) regardless of whether they were members of his government or not. Fourthly since Jabir was intent on maintaining the security of the movement by carrying out part of their activities in secret, and by keeping the members of the organisation unknown to the rulers, he took a strong attitude against those who disclosed the names of the members to the tyrants.⁸⁸

The last and fifth trait of Ibadism is the practice of maintaining a low profile in a hostile climate, which came to be known as the state of *kitman*, thus allowing the Ibadi Muslims to integrate into a non-Ibadi society without feeling the need to promote their identity or views. This is in stark contrast to some of the militancy of other Islamic groups who see their main task as Muslims to aggressively proclaim ‘dawah’ in order to expand the House of Islam.

This presentation of Ibadism as an ecumenically generous force within Islam does seem to be undermined by the work of other scholars. For example, Hoffman describes how

Ibadi doctrine placed the sect in relation to other Muslims. According to it, the only true Muslims are righteous Ibadis, while all other Muslims (called ahl al-khilaf) are nonetheless considered monotheists, People of the Qiblah, and part of the ummah of Islam. Though legally considered as Muslims under Islamic law, they are not true believers. Along with any sinful Ibadis, they will be denied paradise. For them, as for all who are so damned, Hellfire is categorical, homogeneous and eternal. Unlike Sunnis, Ibadis reject the notion that the Prophet and other righteous folk can intercede on behalf of sinful Muslims on the Day of Judgement.⁸⁹

According to Hoffman, then, the Ibadis are as exclusivist in their claims as any of the other Islamic sects.⁹⁰

One practice of the Ibadis, which is said to be derived from the early days in Basra, is the gathering of house groups, which act as study circles.

⁸⁸ Al-Nami, A.K. (2007). *Studies in Ibadhism*. London: Open Minds. Page 45.

⁸⁹ Brown, J. (2014). “The Essentials of Ibadi. Book Review”. *Journal of Shi’a Islamic Studies*. Vol VII. No 3, pp. 353–355.

⁹⁰ Hoffman, V.J. (2012). *The Essentials of Ibadi Islam*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

In Oman today they are known as *halqat al-‘ilm*.⁹¹ There is no appointed leader, which is in keeping with the egalitarian nature of Ibadism and, by emphasising their equality through sitting in a circle on the carpet, there is a learning process which could be described as a peer-led and assisted Qur’anic study which perpetuates the Ibadi doctrine and culture. There is therefore an evangelising component of Ibadism which is embedded in its history. As Limbert highlights,

*[t]he gathering of the halqat al-‘ilm is a well-known practice ... these circles derive from the original secret study gatherings of Ibadis in Basra. ... It seems as they became more established during that century under the leadership of the second Ibadi imam, Abu Ubaydah Muslim bin Abi Karimah. Basra was the centre of the Ibadi movement at the time, and young men would study with Abu Ubaydah or other scholars to become missionaries sent throughout the Middle East spreading the message of Ibadi learning and faith to North Africa, Yemen, Hadhramaut and Oman. These Ibadi missionaries would in turn establish study groups for interested Muslims. While these gatherings were first established to ensure the safety of the community and the continued transmission of the Ibadi knowledge, they later became a place of refuge for students, a kind of hostel or college. This story of the gatherings and the spread of Ibadism with an emphasis on serious study is often repeated in Omani accounts of the early development of Ibadism.*⁹²

These distinctive traits from other mainstream schools of Islam do not endear them to other non-Ibadi Muslims. They acknowledge that they face difficulties, but try to remain meek, even when they ‘have problems with other groups when they go to Mecca and Medina’.⁹³ Another note regarding Ibadi Islam is that there are variants in its theology and practice. As well as some distinctive theology being generated in a North African and Zanzibari context, even within Oman there is reference to the Nizwa school of theology and the Rustaq school of theology.⁹⁴

The resulting ecumenical spirit of Ibadi Islam thus leads to a ‘neither-nor’ ethic.

⁹¹ Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁹² Ibid., page 100.

⁹³ Ibid., page 99.

⁹⁴ Interview DL 2014.

That is to say in addition to saying that they are ‘neither’ Sunni ‘nor’ ‘Shia, Ibadism in the first place distinguished itself from the Kharijite movement which opposed the establishment of a dynastic caliphate by being neither for the establishment of a dynastic succession ‘nor’ willing to force the division of the Muslim community by taking up arms against it. ... Many Omanis thus think of Ibadism as the ‘madhab that is not a madhab’. The common practice in Oman, in which Ibadis and Sunnis readily pray in one another’s mosques, is indicative of a culture in which difference is known and understood but not made a matter of public discourse.⁹⁵

This commitment to an ecumenical ethos is what Oman is celebrated for. Oman is known for subscribing to a distinctive form of Islam which is based on conflict avoidance or a quietist diplomacy. Government discourse up to the rise of Al Qaeda and Daesh tended to emphasise that there is only one Islam. After the rise of Islamic revivalism in Iraq and Syria, the Ibadi tradition is mentioned more in the media as a way of distancing themselves from the Wahhabi ideology, which fuels the extreme behaviour seen in the region.

Yet in the rest of the Arabian Gulf, there is ambivalence towards the school of Ibadi theology. I have also noticed as a resident living in a predominantly Sunni Muslim society that I rarely see Ibadi theological works of authors publicly available in bookshops. There is clearly some screening and restriction of Ibadi theology outside of Oman in the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

CONCLUSION

In his marvellously concise summing up of the imamate history, the Lebanese scholar Khuri concludes the following:

*The struggle for the imamate and that between the imam and the sultan, demonstrates two points: first, the concept of the sovereignty of the religious community is closely linked to the position of the imamate; and political factions in Ibadhi society. This is clearly reflected in what the Ibadis call the four situations of the imamate, namely those of *zubur* (uprising), *difa*’ (defence), *shira* (spread) and *kitman* (concealment). In the ‘rising’ situation, when the imam is visibly in power, the Ibadi community is in full control of its own affairs,*

⁹⁵ Jones, J. & Ridout, N. (2012). *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Page 42.

*independent and free of all foreign intervention. This is a state where the laws of God and the rules of religion are put into effect.*⁹⁶

Just as the rise of the imamate signifies the sovereignty of the religious community, its concealment signifies foreign domination. Clearly the imamate is an expression of the political status of the Ibadi community, and in this sense, it comes to symbolise the collective religious consciousness of the group. The close link between the imamate and the community's sovereignty requires the imam to act as a 'hero', a liberator more than an *'alim* (a man of religious knowledge). In other words, the imamate is a personal achievement, not a divine appointment; the imam is a builder of cities and states rather than a succeeding manifestation of divine justice.

Another observation thrown up by this survey of Ibadi history highlights the role that economic interest has had in provoking tribes to unite and to fight—yet the pretext for rebellion has always been under the rhetoric of religious sentiments. Al-Farsi sees the tensions between the coastal tribes and the interior as both economic and religious. The coastal tribes exposed to international maritime trade were more prosperous and wiser in securing their wealth and hold on power.

*By contrast the Imamate depended on an agrarian economy and eschewed overt reliance on outside powers which could potentially undermine the sanctity of the Ibadi order. Accordingly, the Imams were ill placed to benefit from the economic boom which resulted from the discovery and exportation of oil.*⁹⁷

IBADI ISLAM TODAY

It is fascinating to note in the light of the great contribution to Ibadi Islam by the blind scholar Nur al-Din that his legacy continues in the form of his descendants. The Minister of Religious Affairs today is the great-grandson of Nur al-Din and as such is one of the leading scholars and representatives of the Ibadi faith today. Another leading and public figure for Ibadi Islam is Sheikh Ahmed bin Hamad al Khalili, the Grand Mufti of Muscat. He is 'widely regarded as the authoritative voice for modern Ibadi Omanis'.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. Page 120.

⁹⁷ Al-Farsi, S. (2013). *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman*. London: I.B. Tauris. Page 8.

⁹⁸ A comment made by the principal of the College for Islamic Sciences in Muscat.

In his memoirs, the Anglican Bishop Rt Reverend John Brown describes his meetings with the Grand Mufti of Muscat, a learned scholar who is also a television personality in Oman. Although he did not speak English, the Mufti was well versed in the early Christological debates and in Reformation theology. He told the Bishop that Christianity was now politicised and far removed from its original message. He stated that English Christians were more like Hindus at heart (idolaters) and he tried hard to convert the Bishop to Islam. He spoke knowledgeably of Martin Luther (although rather confusingly the translator was speaking of Martin Luther King).⁹⁹

Bishop John Brown reveals the intense scholarship of Khalili and contrasts it with a somewhat laissez-faire Christian attitude to historical theology. He notes that

*Anglican clergy in Western Christianity who consider the early centuries of Christian conflict as times of semantics and wasted opportunities need to consider how seriously Muslims take these matters, especially the definitions of the sonship of Christ. There is a rigour in Islamic theology which is easy to dismiss as simplistic, but clergy who stopped reading and thinking seriously about the Person of Christ as soon as they left theological college would not make good Christian apologists in the Islamic world.*¹⁰⁰

When asked ‘who was the most influential representative of Ibadi theology in Oman today’ one of my interviewees stated:

*I believe the great scholar Sheikh Ahmed Bin Hamad Al Khalili is an Omani scholar who leads all Omani people, from every sect and every area. That is because he is truly a Muslim scholar who understood Islam morality and values and managed to bring the Omani people together and win their hearts and trust. This is the case for any Muslim who can understand true Islam and reflect it on reality—where he would only seek for the wellbeing of all humanity and would do his best to prevent any harm or mischief. The Prophet (PBUH) said, ‘the best of people are the ones who help people’.*¹⁰¹

The Ibadis do not build shrines, tombs for holy men, spiritual retreats or assemblies, monasteries or edifices. Instead they have sanctified the whole community. They are the ‘Calvinists’ of Islam par excellence, continuously

⁹⁹ Brown, J. (2012). *Mainly Uphill. A Bishop’s Journey*. Sleaford, UK: Clearprint. Pages 175–176.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., page 316.

¹⁰¹ ASS 2015.

searching for, building and amending the divine city. Branching off from Sunni Islam, and originally part of the Khariji movement, they believe that ‘there dwells an imam in every soul’. In other words, they are a community of imams or potential imams.¹⁰²

As Oman continues to evolve as a participant in the global economy, one observer noted the ability of Oman to simultaneously maintain a traditional identity rooted in faith while adapting to the demands of modern society. He said:

*What I continue to appreciate about Ibadi Islam and Islam in Oman is the ability to live with complexity and differing viewpoints theologically, while at the same time work on building a unique Omani identity. The Ibadi school of Islam in my opinion has created a theological space that allows non-Muslim communities a welcome, particularly in Muscat.*¹⁰³

In our next chapter, we will examine some of the historical encounters of Christian travellers passing through Oman in order to discern attitudes and behaviours manifested towards them from the Ibadi Muslim community.

¹⁰² Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. Page 73.

¹⁰³ Comment made by a resident in Muscat in a private email to the author.



CHAPTER 5

Early Encounters Between Christians and Muslims in Oman

After the disappearance of the Beth Mazunaye Diocese during the eighth century, which seems to have been displaced by a combination of economic chaos, church disunity and Islamic expansionism, the historical records of Christian presence in the region were silent for literally hundreds of years until the sixteenth century. The absence of written records is not surprising given the subsistence economy of the Arabian Gulf following the collapse of the Sassanian Empire and the migration of the church further east. As suggested in the previous chapter, the disappearance of Christianity may have been linked to the intertwined combination of the rapid expansion of the aggressive Qarmatian sect and their ‘socialist’-style economics, which had the effect of disrupting the established trading routes and breaking the previous favoured status the Christians had enjoyed within the region. Conflict also remained a feature of the political landscape, but the historical records show that it became more intra-Islamic in nature. The religious minorities were mostly bystanders during this period of history. With no standing armies and little political or economic influence, the Christians were at the mercy of aggressive regimes. The conversion of tribes to Islam meant that tribal loyalties had shifted their religious allegiances as an act of political expediency and that those who held on to the Christian faith as a matter of conviction were soon marginalised and powerless. Over time, the memory of a pre-Islamic Christian presence diminished to an extent where the Christian faith, when it re-emerged later, was seen as a Western and false religion. Some evidence of this is presented later in the chapter.

As we saw in our earlier chapter, after a series of struggles, the Ibadi imamate became the predominant religious authority in the country, though it was often competing for dominance with the Wahhabis and other bitterly divided tribal federations. Another threat came from the Persians, who occasionally invaded the country on one pretext or another. There is no evidence of any significant encounter with Christian ‘others’ with the exception of, perhaps, the occasional trader.

When the encounter finally came, however, it was not an auspicious one and it led to the perception, for several generations of Ibadi Islam, that Christianity was an alien power which used force and political intrigue to gain dominance over the Muslims. This conflict is again set against the background of the Empire’s economic struggles and of Christian imperialism. The Portuguese, who discovered the route around the Cape of Africa to the Indian Ocean, sought to protect and assert their dominance over the spice trade, as well as the (mainly African) slave trade to provide for their colony plantations. They had no interest in seeking equal trading status with the Omanis. However, there was no direct colonisation by the Portuguese in the sense of controlling the country. Rather, they established military points of control through the erection of forts (which are still visible to this day) primarily along the coast as a means of protecting their merchant fleets.

Oman at that time was the predominant naval power in the Indian Ocean, and Muscat was the main entrepôt for the slave trade. Nevertheless, the Portuguese were ruthless in pursuing total control over their trading routes, conquering under the banner of Christianity (as defined by the Roman Catholic Church at that time) and the King. Given the bitterly divided intra-Islamic conflict going on in Oman between the imamate and the Sultan, as well as between the different tribal confederations (the Ghafirīs and the Hinawīs—see previous chapter), the Portuguese were able to control the coastal towns and the maritime trade within a short period of time. With the superior weaponry of the Portuguese, their strategically placed forts, use of torture and ruthless passion fuelled by the desire for financial success, all under the pretext of their Christian-based world view that part of their mission was to ‘civilise’ the world,¹ Omanis experienced Christianity as the religion of the powerful.

¹ Stephens, H.M. (1897). *Albuquerque: The Early Portuguese Settlement in India*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.

Given this primary negative exposure to Christians via the Portuguese Navy and Marines it is surprising that there was any goodwill remaining towards future Christian outsiders, and yet, it would seem that the missionaries encountered minimum hostility and suspicion in the nineteenth century. Could this general lack of hostility imply that there is something inherent within Ibadi theology which overrides previous experiences of the religious ‘other’, especially when these experiences have been negative? Or, alternatively, does the Omani forbearance of religious minorities simply reflect an economically pragmatic trading philosophy rooted in a long maritime history? The following section seeks to examine these questions by looking at Christian historical encounters and then documenting the experience of the contemporary church.

THE PORTUGUESE

In 1507, the notorious Alfonso De Albuquerque of the Portuguese Royal Navy landed in Muscat and Muttrah and, after a brutal invasion, built fortresses on the coast and deep into the interior of Oman.²

The presence of the Portuguese in the region was firmly linked to trade and colonial expansionism in the Indian Ocean. In the case of the Gulf region, trade was not the primary concern governing their relationship with the local Arabs—rather it was protection, particularly from sea-going vessels which had the potential to disrupt the merchant ships of the Portuguese Navy. The Omanis in particular had the capacity to threaten Portuguese maritime interests and, as such, Alfonso De Albuquerque showed no mercy in destroying the boats and ships he found along the coast of the Arabian Peninsula.

At that time, the Omanis’ main maritime trading industry operated out of the deep harbour of Muscat, ‘trading in slaves, dates, horses and corn’.³ Before the discovery of oil, the production of dates was the main contributor to the economy in Oman, although the income it generated was nowhere close to the income generated by the oil industry.⁴ According to Philip Ward in his comprehensive text *Travels in Oman*, the Portuguese

² Heard-Bey, F. (2004). *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing.

³ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. Page 1.

⁴ Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Page 70.

did not attempt to interfere with the religious beliefs and practices of the Omanis, but he went on to record that ‘the Portuguese destroyed a beautiful wooden mosque and burned 34 ships’.⁵ Any supposed religious tolerance is undermined in further accounts, where the Portuguese anti-Islamic stance is revealed through their activity of ‘razing over half of the mosques along the Muscat seaboard’.⁶

Historical interpretations from non-Portuguese sources invariably expose the brutality of the Portuguese forces and there is little evidence to show any positive encounters with the local Arab population. Portuguese sources reveal dispassionate concern for the local Gulf Arabs and see their actions in the light of wider trading concerns and the glorification of the Portuguese Empire.

Ironically, the Portuguese were invited into Muscat by the local people in order to deal with what they perceived as a greater threat—the Qawasim pirates from Ras Al Khaimah. The pirates had made their base in Muscat, and when Alfonso de Albuquerque

*discovered that the pirates were using the deep and well protected harbour as a hideaway, he landed troops and cannons in a nearby village called Sidab and marched onto the city. The citizens of Muscat who were tired of the cruel pirates admitted the Portuguese into Muscat and helped the newcomers drive out or sink the pirate ships.*⁷

The Qawasim were a tribe affiliated with the Ghafiri, whereas the coastal plains and Muscat itself contained tribes who considered themselves allied with the Hinawi faction. This tribal rivalry thus created the opportunity for the Portuguese to insert themselves. The Ibadis lost control of their economic assets and entered into a time of recession combined with oppression. This state of affairs lasted for almost a century.

After several centuries, Christianity was reintroduced into Oman through the chaplains of the Portuguese Navy who were quick to establish worship centres managed by religious orders on the trade route from Europe to India. In Muscat, for example,

⁵ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. Page 1.

⁶ Morris, J. (1957). *Sultan in Oman*. London: Eland. Page 138.

⁷ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1951). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 226:14.

[t]here was a Portuguese convent of the Augustinian friars discovered close to the foot of Fort Mirani. The convent was built shortly after the two main forts and was described by Don Garcia De Silva, the Spanish Ambassador who stayed there soon after its completion in 1617. It had accommodation for fifteen friars besides the church which was later used as a cathedral. The name, 'Bait Graiza', is in fact derived from the Portuguese 'igreja', meaning a church.⁸

The veneration of the Virgin Mary was a prominent feature of the Portuguese brand of Roman Catholicism and this is referred to in a report put together by General Haig, who wrote of the Omanis that

[t]heir idea of Christianity must, in the past, have been derived from the Portuguese. These Romanists are styled 'polytheists' in the Arab country of Oman, and left behind them at least one monument of their Mariolatry in a chapel with an inscription to the Virgin which still exists in one of the ruined Portuguese forts.⁹

The significance of visible Mariolatry in Oman is that it would have confirmed the Islamic teachings found in the Qur'an that Christians worshipped Mary as part of a divine collective,¹⁰ thus confirming their fears that Christians are polytheists committing the major sin of *shirk* (giving something equal status to God). Such an understanding, or rather misunderstanding, of Christianity would have laid a theological foundation for rebellion by the Omanis against this foreign and heretical religion.

This negative perception of Christianity contributed to the growing determination amongst Omanis to unite and drive out the Portuguese. The historical narrative from this time period framed the conflict in religious terms. It was clearly interpreted as a case of Muslims rising up against the Christians.

Sirhan, a noted Omani historian, describes the resistance against the Portuguese by the Omani interior tribes and notes that Imam Nasir bin Murshid was successful in his early military campaigns, and many towns and regions submitted to him 'except for Sur and Keriya which were held by the Christians'.¹¹ Then, in 1633, there was a ceasefire between

⁸ Searle, P. (1975). *Dawn Over Oman*. Beirut: Khayat Publishing. Page 59.

⁹ Haig, C.A. (1902). *Memories of the Life of General F.T. Haig*. London: Marshall Brothers. Page 178.

¹⁰ Sura 5:119.

¹¹ Sirhan, I.S. (trans by Ross, E.C.) (1984). *Annals of Oman*. Cambridge: The Oleander Press. Page 47.

the Imam's army and the Christians after the Battle of Sohar, which saw 'the Christians keeping us under a fire of cannon from the fort'. Finally the victorious Omani commander rode to Muttrah 'where the leaders of the Christians agreed upon the terms of peace'.¹²

The Omani uprising, which began under the leadership of the interior Imam Nasir bin Murshid al-Ya'rubi, resulted in the interior being claimed back and then finally the fall of the Portuguese forts in Muttrah and Muscat. The bloody oppression by the Portuguese meant that the Christian symbol of the cross was hated and feared¹³ and subsequently Christian imagery was removed or destroyed.

The Portuguese legacy is one which dismayed the American missionaries who arrived in the late 1800s.

*It is a matter of conjecture what might have been the course of another nation but it is certain that the Portuguese under their renowned Captain Albuquerque as with fire and sword they ravaged the coast and did nothing to commend the teaching of Him whose crucified form was doubtless before their eyes.*¹⁴

Cantine recalls the memory of a Muscat Omani, telling of how the Portuguese liberated their prisoners 'after cutting off their noses and ears'.¹⁵ This unpleasant memory is confirmed by the historian Captain Arthur Stiffe who surveyed the area of Muscat in 1860. He records how 'Albuquerque ordered his marines to cut off the noses and ears of the Moors whom they had captured and then left them on the shore and returned aboard "*giving many thanks to our Lord*". They then apparently proceeded to Hormuz'.¹⁶

It is tragic that in the early centuries in the Arabian Gulf, Christians fled from terror of persecution from the Sassanian empire and other regimes and found refuge amongst the Arabs, only to return centuries later as the source of terror themselves. The most significant achievement of Portuguese Christianity was that, in time, it enabled the Omani tribes to come together in a rare show of unity to drive out the foreign presence and assert a national Ibadi identity.

¹² Ibid., page 52.

¹³ Scudder R.L. (1998). *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans. Page 121.

¹⁴ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1940). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 187:8.

¹⁵ Ibid. 1940, 187:6.

¹⁶ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. P. 29.

THE BRITISH

In an interview,¹⁷ an American scholar suggested that the most significant factor in the Omani attitude towards Christianity was the rise of Britain as a naval power in the region. He argued that the status of the Christian church in Oman today is a direct result of the British control of trade and their involvement and engagement with the ruling family. The following examines the evidence for this opinion.

The prevailing maritime power in the Arabian Gulf during the next two centuries was determined as a result of competing Western nations seeking to secure a lucrative trading shipping route between India, the Gulf and the West. After the Portuguese Navy dwindled, the Dutch dominated the seas establishing colonies in the East, especially in Indonesia. Their supremacy was soon challenged and replaced by the British. When it came to the Arabian Gulf, the British were not really interested in establishing colonies. Instead, they were seeking to protect the shipping routes of the East India Company and sought to secure this through the use of treaties with the local Arab rulers. The British also brought with them a different experience of the Christian religion to the Omanis. This time instead of invasion and violence, Christianity was present in the context of trade and shipping.

The earliest example we have of this is the case of Philip Wylde, a representative of the East India Company, when he concluded a treaty with the Imam Nasir bin Murshid at Sohar in 1645, which included the clause '*That we may have license to exercise our own religion*'.¹⁸

The Omanis also inserted (reflecting that this was a more equal partnership in which the Omanis could have a say about their own affairs) 'No Christian shall have any license in any part of this Kingdom, besides the English to supply this port'.¹⁹

In short, there was a mutual economic benefit for the English Christians to be allowed to worship within Oman. In practice, the Christian presence was mainly limited to the coastal region known as the Al-Batinah. There was still a deep antipathy towards the Christian presence and this sometimes led to extreme consequences as the following story reveals:

¹⁷ Interview with JW February 2017.

¹⁸ Skeet, I. (1974). *Muscat and Oman: The End of an Era*. London: Faber & Faber. Page 212.

¹⁹ Skeet, I. (1974). *Ibid.*, p. 212.

*Richard Blakeney visited Muscat in 1814; he tells us in a Journal of an Oriental Voyage*²⁰ *that the forts were in a ruinous state, and that when a sailing boat capsized and the Royal Navy rescued thirty-two passengers, the eight women among them were put to death since they had been seen by Christians.*²¹

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a series of treaties signed between the Omani rulers and the British powers consolidated British interests in the Arabian Gulf. This was often at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, which also considered the Arabian Gulf as part of their domain. Local Arab rulers were often in a predicament of not knowing who to defer to in matters of regional interests. By the time of the oil discoveries, however, the Ottoman Empire was in decline and there was little they could do by way of responding to British military might. By the twentieth century, the main consistent power in the region was Great Britain, patrolling the Gulf with the Royal Navy. Reverend Pennings of the Arabian Mission sums up the political context of the British arrival and presence:

The English gained the balance of power by the suppression of piracy during the years 1808 until 1865, which has finally ended in a state of affairs strongly resembling a protectorate. During the last year the affairs of the Gulf have been the subject of much political discussion, seeing Russia is supposed at times to cast a longing eye towards the Gulf of Persia. On the other hand the English would hardly be expected to welcome a rival here owing to the proximity of India. ... The Gulf is growing in importance because of the Baghdad Railway, which promises to become a reality at last.²²

During this time, the policy of the British was mainly to leave the local ruling tribes to manage their own affairs, only intervening if called upon by the leading sheikh, or if their own trading and shipping interests were threatened. This meant that tribal culture and traditions continued uninterrupted. The British also made a nominal attempt to respect Islam as the following vignette demonstrates:

²⁰ Blakeney, R. (1841). *Journal of an Oriental Voyage*. London.

²¹ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. Page 10.

²² *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1913). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 84:20.

*Captain W.F. Owen, commanding H.M.S. Leven, visited Muscat in December 1823. In his Narrative of Voyages to [E]xplore the Shores of Arabia, Africa and Madagascar*²³ [he] describes how when Sayyid Sa'id was due to come on board, the crew hung pigs bought for meat in nets over the side to avoid offending the Sayyid's Islamic sensibilities. Their squealing resounded all around the harbor, amusing everyone including the Sayyid, who courteously received from Owen a Bible in Arabic, offering in exchange a gold hilted sword.²⁴

The Omanis had a strong religious and cultural awareness and they were determined to maintain this as part of their historical identity. Despite the Omanis being invaded by the Persians, the Portuguese and the British

*what they lost through religious dogma was gained through cultural dictum, the 'myth of origin'. They believe that they are the lords of the land, the original inhabitants of the territory, a right that has been passed on from one generation to another since ancient times. ... And to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population in Oman, they wear a dagger in the centre of the waist, a symbol of manliness and freedom. The Baluch in Oman make the dagger and the Ibadis wear it.*²⁵

Christian travellers in remote parts of Oman would report different responses from the interior tribes who would address them as *nasarani*, which is one of the Qur'anic terms used for Christian. Wilfred Thesiger, the legendary explorer who travelled through the Empty Quarter, reports that there were quite a few times when he had to move through the region by stealth as there were extreme tribal elements who would kill him outright simply because he was *nasarani*.²⁶ Further north in the Gulf, Eleanor Calverly, a missionary doctor with the Arabian mission, described how she would be followed through the streets by taunting children chanting the word *nasarani* as a term of abuse.²⁷ Sir Percy Cox on his travels through the interior of Oman noted how he was addressed by the local people:

²³ Owen, W.F. (1833). *Voyages to Explore the Shores of Arabia, Africa and Madagascar*. London: R. Bentley.

²⁴ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. Page 13.

²⁵ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. Page 74.

²⁶ Thesiger, W. (2007 Centenary Edition) *Arabian Sands*. Dubai: Motivate Publishers.

²⁷ Calverley, E.T. (1958). *My Arabian Days and Nights*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company.

*They always applied to me the word 'Nasarani'. For instance 'Good morning O Christian' or 'Hey Christian there is no road that way'. The term did not appear to be used disdainfully, as the speakers were quite friendly, and I took it to be a relic of Wahhabi fanaticism, which was predominant in this district in the last century.*²⁸

Anyone coming in from outside Oman hoping to change its people in terms of their religion and culture were in for a tough challenge.

²⁸ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. Page 315.



CHAPTER 6

Missionary Impact

This chapter focuses on the work of the Arabian Mission. It has been argued that the American missionaries who gave selflessly to the Omani people through their medical and educational service influenced the Omani acceptance of the church more than any other factor.¹ Using the primary material produced by these Western pioneers we will seek to discern the attitude of the Omanis towards the Christian community. We are also looking for the use of Ibadi Islamic sources in these encounters. What this chapter also clearly shows is the interplay between the tribes and the political and economic circumstances which impacted the work of the early missionaries.

THE ARABIAN MISSION

Only one group of people were up for this challenge. Instead of seeking to oppress the Omanis through colonisation, economic exploitation or military might, they believed they might win their hearts and souls through Christian mission. These were the missionaries of the Reformed Church in America. They came to serve in the region under the umbrella of what became known as the Arabian Mission. The motivation of the missionaries

¹ Scudder R.L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans, Skinner, R.F. (1992) *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press. Woodberry, R.D. (2004). *The Shadow of Empire: Christian Missions, Colonial Policy and Democracy in Post-Colonial Societies*. Unpublished Thesis: University of North Carolina.

was deeply theological. They had a deep conviction to fulfil the great commission of Jesus Christ which was ‘to go into the world and make disciples of all nations’.² Hitherto, Arabia was seen as a neglected mission field and Islam was seen as a challenge to the church. Their mission to evangelise was partly motivated by the biblical belief that once all the nations had received the Gospel, they would usher in the return of Christ as Messiah and thus the Gospel would ultimately triumph over Islam. The initial efforts of the missionaries therefore focused on evangelism and the distribution of the Bible and tracts in Arabic. Polemical encounters between the missionaries and local imams saw an emphasis on the role of theological apologetics in debate, a tactic which the local Islamic leaders were quick to respond to, developing their own resources to counter the claims of Christianity.³ The massive failure of this ‘proclamation’ strategy, in that there was no mass conversion of the local Arabs to Christianity, led the missionaries to a different theological strategy.⁴ The emphasis shifted from ‘proclamation’ to service, and the resulting caring and compassionate ministry through medical mission finally led to some fruit in the form of a very small number of conversions. Even then, in an interview with an Omani scholar (who requested he be anonymous),⁵ he argued that there were no converts who were properly recognised as Omani by him. Those who did convert from Islam to Christianity were those who were on the periphery of Omani society and tribal life, such as the lepers, and converts who were from slave families or Arab families from outside of Oman.

The records of the Arabian Mission are largely documented in the newsletters sent home to their supporters in the USA and in the reports of their church councils which are bound together in the volumes referred to in this work as *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling*.⁶ As primary documents we can understand that their main function was to raise prayer, awareness and sympathy for their cause, which would result in American readers

² Matthew 28:19.

³ Green, N. (2014). *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ It can be argued that the medical service of the Arabian Mission was part of its DNA from the very beginning and the medical tours of Samuel Zwemer became the template for his successors. See Scudder R.L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans.

⁵ Interview with AM May 2014.

⁶ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling. The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood.

contributing financially. In short, it was a tool for fundraising with the ultimate aim of creating a church for Omani converts from Islam. With this in mind, the critical reader would look for bias in how the work of the mission is presented and how Islam is portrayed. The potential for misrepresentation of missionary endeavour would have been restricted by the flow of regular visitors from the USA, who came to report and assess the work and the internal ethical code held by Christian workers who would clearly be in violation of their values if they were exposed back home as lying or exaggerating in their narratives.

Al-Sayegh, an Emirati scholar, believes that some of the missionaries did exaggerate their stories. She cites as an example the story of Reverend James Moerdyk, whose opportunism is revealed in his opening of a medical clinic, even though he had no medical training at all. He knew the local people would come to him in the belief that Western medicine was effective. Despite encountering resistance, Moerdyk distributed many tracts. Al-Sayegh, however, questions the veracity of his account of how many scriptures he sold to the Muslim people; she comments, '[f]or a population who were 95% illiterate, Bible sales were suspiciously high.'⁷ Al-Sayegh concludes that the reason why Moerdyk exaggerated his account was so that he could impress his readers back in the USA and motivate them to give more to his 'successful' missionary endeavours.

Yet, the missionaries were by and large diligent and intelligent in recording their observations, albeit with a Western perspective. The academic and intellectual vigour required of the medical profession in the USA meant that the missionaries naturally applied the same standard of learning to their reporting of Islamic history and observations of contemporary culture. They represented the best of the orientalist scholarship which was later so savagely criticised by Edward Said.⁸ There were, however, blind spots in their reporting. The records of the Arabian Mission, for example, largely ignores or only superficially acknowledges the experiences of their staff from India, and does not provide many first-hand reports from their Arab colporteurs.

So where did the Arabian Mission come from and how did it relate to the Omani people?

⁷ Al-Sayegh, F. (1996) "American Missionaries in the UAE Region in the Twentieth Century". *Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol 32. Page 126.

⁸ Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

ORIGINS OF THE ARABIAN MISSION

The Arabian Mission was the brainchild of John Lansing, who was the Professor of Old Testament Language at the Seminary of the Reformed Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He was born in the Middle East and grew up in Damascus and Cairo, which gave him a deep and abiding affection for the Arab people and their culture. As a consequence of poor health, Lansing was not able to serve in the mission field as an adult and instead put his considerable talents to use in academia. In this role, he was able to pass on his enthusiasm, knowledge of the Arabic language and his desire to see the Gospel go to Arabia to students under his charge.⁹

Three of these students were to rise to Lansing's challenge to travel to Arabia as missionaries in 1889. They were James Cantine, Samuel Zwemer and Philip Phelps. Of these three, Samuel Zwemer went on to become the tireless public figure of the Arabian Mission. With a prodigious output of scholarly and personal writings which informed the American public about Islam and Arabia and a somewhat reckless schedule of medical outreach journeys across the Arabian Gulf (he was not a trained medical doctor), Zwemer pioneered the way for other (qualified) medical practitioners to follow him out into the mission field.

THE INFLUENCE OF SAMUEL ZWEMER

Zwemer was instrumental in educating a Western audience in the intricacies of Islamic theology and he pioneered the Western study of Islam through his writings, not least through a widely respected academic journal, *The Muslim World*. As Zwemer became more immersed in Arabia, so his understanding and sympathy for the local people grew. In a *National Geographic* article, he described the Sultan and the Omani people in the following terms:

*They are remarkably free from fanaticism, simple in their habits, and wonderful in their hospitality. Most of them belong to the Abadi sect which has many beliefs in common with Christianity, and the experience of our missionaries has been that the people are not only accessible, but willing to learn, and many of them not only eager for medical help, but for teaching.*¹⁰

⁹ Scudder R.L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans. Page 139.

¹⁰ National Geographic (1911) January. Page 88–89.

In particular, the missionaries were a conduit to the West in first highlighting and understanding the distinctiveness of Ibadi Islam. In the early days of the Mission, their awareness of the Ibadis was still evolving as the following letter reveals:

The sect native to this region is designated by the name of Abadha, which is one of the six divisions of the Khawajri, or 'Seceders'. The Khawajri first came into existence in AD 655–660 when Ali was Khalifah. Later they took refuge in Oman. Someone has named this sect the 'Calvinists of Islam'. Their doctrines are gloomy and morose, hard and fanatical. Many of them are strict fatalists, and hold that only God has decided as to their lasting fate, but because of this decree their life here, whether for good or for evil, is not to be taken seriously into account. They declare that of the seventy three sects of Islam theirs only is the orthodox, and the general body of Moslems are unbelievers. ... In practice they are more liberal, and largely so because of their sinful natures and appetites. ... They are quite liberal sometimes in the interpretation of the Koran. Many passages interpreted literally by other sects are by them declared to be figurative. On the whole they hold less strongly to the commentaries and traditions, and are therefore more easily approached on many subjects. Their ceremonies are much simpler than in other sects, and there is less external display on occasions such as the birth of a child or funerals.¹¹

Zwemer is also acknowledged as a vital contributor to the evolving theology and praxis of the Christian Mission. A crisis, provoked by the chaos of the First World War, caused many theologians to rethink their somewhat sunny optimism for the future growth of the church and their assumed colonial advantage in bringing the Gospel to developing nations. Samuel Zwemer led the charge that 'against the backdrop of the brutality of World War I and ensuing economic depressions, traditional nineteenth century missionary methods were inadequate'.¹²

The first Arabian Mission centre was established in Basra in Iraq (1892), followed by Bahrain (1893), the latter becoming the base for Zwemer's activities. A third centre was eventually set up in Oman in 1896 by Peter Zwemer, Samuel Zwemer's brother. Their arrival in Muscat was an indirect challenge to the slave trade, which at the time was the predominant economic activity in Oman.

¹¹ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1904). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 50:7.

¹² Vander Werf, L.L. (1934) *Christian Mission to Muslims*. Pasadena: William Carey Library. 1934:254.

MUSCAT AND THE SLAVE TRADE

The first Western missionary who sought to be intentionally resident in Oman is widely believed to be a former Anglican Bishop. The Rt Reverend Thomas Valpy French did not last long in Muscat but his brief foray had lasting impact. The only other Christian resident in Muscat at that time was recorded to be a retired Indian doctor.¹³

Bishop French served with the Church Missionary Society in Pakistan for 40 years and then committed himself to serving as a missionary in Arabia. His change of location was a response to a plea from another Anglican Bishop, Rt Reverend Mackey of Uganda, who witnessed first-hand the misery of the slave trade. Slaves were being forcibly taken from his diocese in Uganda by Arab traders and he identified that the economic headquarters for the slave trade was in Muscat. Bishop Mackey believed that only by bringing the Gospel to Muscat would there be any meaningful chance of causing the slave trade to cease. Thus Bishop Mackey called out to have a Mission centre specifically in Muscat. He wrote:

*Muscat in more sense than one is key to central Africa. I do not deny that the task is difficult. ... The Arabs have helped us often, and have hindered us likewise. We owe them therefore a double debt, which I can see no more effective way of paying them [than] by at once establishing a strong mission at their very headquarters—Muscat itself.*¹⁴

Recognising that Muscat was economically significant to the slave trade, Bishop French committed himself to building an Anglican mission there. He travelled extensively through Arabia, learning Arabic, and *en route* met Cantine and Zwemer in Aden, Yemen. While travelling together on a steamer ship, he encouraged them to join him in Muscat.¹⁵ Given that the slave trade was a major source of wealth for the ruling family, the stage appeared to be set for a serious conflict of interest when the missionaries arrived in Oman.

Shortly after arriving in Muscat, Bishop French wrote to the Church Missionary Society in 1891 describing his experience of the Omani people:

¹³ Birks, H. (1895). *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Valpy French*. London.

¹⁴ Zwemer, S. (1900). *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam*. Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier. Page 330.

¹⁵ Skinner, R.F. (1992) *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press. Page 49.

There is much outward observance of religious forms; there are crowds of mosques; rather a large portion of educated men and women too; the latter take special interest in religious questions, and sometimes lead the opposition to the Gospel. They have large girls' schools and female teachers. There is a leper's village nigh at hand to the town. I occupied for the second time this morning a shed they have allotted to me, well roofed over; and these poor lepers, men and women gather in fair numbers to listen. Chiefly however, I reach the educated by the roadside or in a house portico, sometimes even in a mosque, which is for me a new experience. Still there is considerable shyness, occasionally bitter opposition. Yet bright faces of welcome sometimes cheer me, and help me on and I am only surprised that so much is borne with. I have made special efforts to get into the mosques, but most often this is refused. The Moolahs and Muallims seem afraid of coming to help me on in my translations, or in encountering with me the more difficult passages in the best classics. This has surprised me and disconcerted me rather, but I have been saved in the main from anything like depression.¹⁶

Not long after this letter was written, Bishop French was travelling to Seeb by boat and died from heatstroke,¹⁷ after insisting on wearing his black cassock.¹⁸ His body was buried in a small Christian cemetery in a cove that can only be approached from the sea. His gravestone is inscribed with the message that he was the first missionary to Oman. His desire to confront the slave trade was never fulfilled in his lifetime. Perhaps more significantly, French's emphasis on social action (in combatting slavery) as an expression of his Christian faith led the way for others to shift their encounters with Islam away from a didactical model to one of humanitarian service. More significantly, he shifted the confrontation between Islam and Christianity away from a theological discourse to one which became more serious—a direct challenge to trading interests.

With the slave trade being a lucrative source of income to the ruling family, as they held monopoly over it, the threat to their wealth had to be removed. Failure to do so would lead to the collapse of a singular stream of income, thus forcing the rulers to pursue a more diverse economic strategy which would result in the permission of a more relaxed social environment, including a freeing up of religious practice. This is one of

¹⁶French, T.V. (1891) *Church Missionary Intelligencer Journal*. May & July: 350.

¹⁷His journals recount, however, an ongoing struggle with serious sickness which often led him to be bed-bound and on more than one occasion close to death. See Birks, H. (1895). *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Valpy French*. Vol. 2. London: John Murray.

¹⁸Skinner, R.F. (1992) *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press. Page 50.

the arguments made by the rentier state theorists (see conclusion for a fuller discussion). The more control a ruling elite has over the means of production, the less social freedom there is (including religious freedom).

Shortly after this event, James Cantine arrived. Saddened and discouraged by the death of Thomas Valpy French, he concluded: 'from a missionary standpoint I did not think that Muscat was sufficiently inviting to cancel further exploration.'¹⁹ He clearly did not share the conviction nor feel the need to confront the slave trade at that time.

Yet, the slave trade eventually created an opportunity for the Arabian Mission to place their first resident in Muscat. This turned out to be Peter Zwemer, the brother of Samuel Zwemer.

The initial negative report about the suitability of Muscat as a base was clearly revised, as a report sent back to the USA by Peter Zwemer described the advantages of Muscat in positively glowing terms:

*It is a steamer port, has regular mails, and although excessively hot, the climate is healthy and free from the malaria so prevalent elsewhere. ... The freedom granted to Europeans on account of the peculiar relation of the Sultan's government to that of Great Britain is an incalculable privilege in a Mohammedan country. The Scriptures may be freely read in public. Open discussion at either of the city gates in the presence of a European, will not be disturbed and instruction such as where it is desired may be freely given.*²⁰

Yet later reports revealed that Oman was a country of two halves. On the one hand, there was Muscat with its open maritime trading tradition. This gave Muscat more of an open cosmopolitan culture:

*[B]ecause of its proximity to India ... and because of its tribal and trade relations with Zanzibar, [Muscat] has adopted many customs foreign to the Arab[s] in other parts of Arabia. ... One can distinguish the noise of the Baluchians from the dancing and tom-tom music of the negroes, and the Arab drum and dance are quite different from both.*²¹

¹⁹ Zwemer, S. & Cantine, J. (1938). *The Golden Milestone: Reminiscences of Pioneer Days Fifty Years Ago in Arabia*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company. Page 42.

²⁰ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1894). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. Page 7.

²¹ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1904). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 50:4–5.

On the other hand, the other Oman was the interior, which was either forbidden to the missionaries or had restrictions placed on it:

*An inland tour has not been attempted on account of the fact that no books were to be taken. Many Arabs from the interior have visited our shop and made purchases. Travel by boat was easier as we had procured letters of permission to travel from the Sultan, to the Walis or Governors of the principal places along the coast.*²²

However, after a 5-month stay beginning in early December 1893, Peter Zwemer eventually returned to establish the Arabian Mission's first institution in Muscat.²³

In 1896, the British frigate the *H.M.S. Lapwing* rescued eighteen boys from an Arab slave ship. The British were enforcing the anti-slavery bill passed by William Wilberforce. Peter Zwemer pledged guardianship for the rescued slave boys to the British consul in Muscat and Zwemer promised that he would 'feed, clothe, house, educate and prepare the boys for adult life until the age of eighteen'.²⁴

When Peter Zwemer set up a school with a group of the rescued slave boys, he noted:

*There is still a considerable trade in slaves along the Oman coast, and occasionally, as permitted by the 'Brussels Conference', slave dhows are captured, the owners punished and the slaves set free. During May last year, three slave dhows were captured in the vicinity of Muscat. They contained in all forty-four slaves, the majority of them being boys between the ages of six and twelve, as these bring the highest prices in the slaves marts of Oman.*²⁵

Peter Zwemer died from sickness very suddenly in 1898, and upon his death a new agreement for the custody of the slave boys was drawn up between the American Arabian Mission and the British Consul. Thus, the American Arabian Mission began a school for slave boys, whilst Britain was enforcing her imperial will against the African slave trade, a source of

²² *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1984). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. Page 9.

²³ Scudder R.L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son.* Michigan: Eerdmans. Page 164.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Page 169.

²⁵ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1896). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. 19:11.

prosperity particularly for the Arab traders in Muscat. The slave trade never stopped; instead it simply relocated to other coastal areas of Oman away from the British presence. The missionaries described in their regular bulletins they sent home that they encountered an active slaving centre in Soor, transportation being easily effected under the tricolor,²⁶

*which defies British inspection. Soor is the terminus of several slave routes to the interior.*²⁷

They also found an active enclave of slave trading only at half a day sailing south from Muscat:

*Banda Jissa is a small harbour entirely invisible from the sea and owned by a wealthy Arab sheikh, whose family and retinue are the only inhabitants; and who in this secluded place, with its road to the interior, avoid customs dues, and trade in slaves with a free hand.*²⁸

The ruling family's response to the missionary and British naval campaigns against the slavery trade was to prevaricate and obfuscate the political agreements made with the British, agreeing overtly to their demands but then moving the slave trade to remote places in the hope that it would not be discovered. The lucrative trade was too valuable to simply give up.

The slave trade continued to be a feature of Omani society, though the British Royal Navy curtailed most of it by the early 1900s. The British representatives in Muscat most clearly asserted their authority with regard to the slave trade by granting manumission to any slave who managed to clasp the flagpole on the premises of the British Consul. The slaves who achieved this were presented with a certificate granting them freedom from slavery. The British insisted that the slaves' new status of emancipation was to be respected by the Omani people. Long after the original flagpole was removed, a brass plaque still marks the spot where many an escaped slave found their freedom. This blatant flaunting of British power

²⁶This is a reference to the French. See Al-Qasimi (1996) *Omani-French Relations: 1715–1900*. (Trans. Pridham, B.R.) Exeter: Forest Row, for a historical overview of Omani-French relations.

²⁷*Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1895). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 16:10.

²⁸*Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1896). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 19:9.

on Omani soil was not appreciated and, after the British embassy was relocated, the Sultan ordered the old British consul to be unceremoniously bulldozed.²⁹ It is noteworthy that it was only in 1971 that slavery was legally abolished under Omani law.³⁰

Having started the slave school as the most visible enterprise of the Arabian Mission, it was essential that a replacement be found. Peter Zwemer was replaced by George Stone, who within months also died from fever. His body is buried next to Bishop French. Next came James Cantine, who, overcoming his initial dislike of Muscat, replaced George Stone and ran the school known locally as the Freed Slave School until 1901.

In 1904 James Cantine married Elizabeth De Pree, who was the first single woman recruited by the Arabian Mission. Together with James, she ran a day school for boys which was attended even by members of the ruling family. This school functioned right up to 1931, when it closed due to lack of funds.³¹ Alongside the school, there was also a Bible shop ministry in Muscat which represented the main evangelistic presence of the Mission.

THE MEDICAL WORK

We continue the historical narrative from our preceding paragraph. In addition to the school, Elizabeth De Pree also set up a medical clinic for Omani women and this became the first of the clinics run by the Arabian Mission in Oman.

The arrival of Sharon and May Thoms signalled the beginning of the main medical work for which the Arabian Mission became best known. Opposition to establishing a hospital came from the Sultan (not surprisingly as the Sultan saw the Mission as using the hospital as a platform for evangelism)³²; from the British consul who was suspicious of American interests in a domain in which the British had established treaties with the

²⁹ Beasant, J. (2013). *Oman: The True Life Drama and Intrigue of an Arab State*. Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing. Page 73.

³⁰ Alston, R. & Laing, S. (2012). *Unshook Till the End of Time. A History of Relations Between Britain & Oman 1650–1970*. London: Gilgamesh Publishing.

³¹ Scudder R.L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans. Page 172.

³² The Sultan's suspicions seem justified as several anecdotes are shared about the missionaries preaching to bed-bound patients—literally a captive audience. See Scudder R.L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans.

local rulers; but more surprisingly from the honorary American consul, a British citizen and Muslim by confession.³³ This was overcome by Cantine lobbying the US State Department for the removal of the honorary US consul and this bore fruit with the arrival of the more sympathetic American consul Henry Cobb. Land was bought in the city of Muttrah and fundraising to build a hospital there began in earnest.

Yet, the response of the Omani people was not always so welcoming. Cantine recalls his arrival in Muscat and the difficulty he had in finding a home to rent:

However houses of a sort were plentiful and I was not worried until several owners of various properties on different pretexts refused us as tenants. I asked an Arab friend what was the matter. He replied, 'Don't you know? The governor has posted notices that no one in the city is allowed under severe penalties to rent a house to the American missionaries'.³⁴

The problem was eventually solved when the Persian consul offered them a house belonging to his consulate.

Several years later, Dr Sharon Thoms describes a difficult landing in Muscat and the discovery that

Sultan Faisal showed a fearful dislike to the idea of a medical missionary entering his dominions. I was called before the Sultan and told that there were sufficient doctors in his realm and I must leave, at least not practice. We pointed out there was only one doctor in Muscat, and none at all in Muttrah, unless he counted the native 'hakims' who could not even remove a splinter from a foot without exposing the patient to the risk of blood poison; that there would be plenty of work for at least six doctors in either place mentioned.³⁵

It was only after treating hundreds of patients (900 patients in 1 week according to his account)³⁶ that they gained the favour of the people.

At the time, Sultan Faisal was dealing with a serious armed insurrection led by an imam from Rustaq who was particularly incensed by the Sultan

³³ Ibid. Page 174.

³⁴ Zwemer, S. & Cantine, J. (1938). *The Golden Milestone: Reminiscences of Pioneer Days Fifty Years Ago in Arabia*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company. Page 58.

³⁵ *Neglected Arabia /Arabia Calling* (1909). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 70:11.

³⁶ Ibid. 70:12.

showing favours to the 'Christian foreigners'.³⁷ This reveals that the Imam clearly saw a theological justification for opposing the Sultan, or more likely was using the presence of the American Mission as a pretext for rebellion.

As time went on, the missionaries gained the trust of the Sultan and his favour. Zwemer delights that the Sultan 'gifted them with a bit of land to make their garden bigger. ... It was unexpected and very unusual as he was noted as being very averse to foreigners obtaining any further hold of his country.'³⁸

Tragedy struck in 1913 when Sharon Thoms died after falling off a ladder while stringing up a telephone wire. Thoms' body was buried in the same cove as the bodies of Bishop French and George Stone. (The burial ground for Christians could only be approached from the sea by boat. The lack of land access to the graveyard raises the following question: 'Was this a deliberate policy by the Omani rulers at that time, in order to preserve the purity of their community?')

Years later a tribute by James Cantine records the hands-on approach that Thoms took in his work. He was not only a doctor but also played a part in introducing the Omanis to some new Western technologies such as setting up a telecommunications network. More revealing is that he had cultivated a working relationship with the Sultan and the *Waly* (a local governor), which reflected a high level of trust. Cantine writes:

In some ways the last hours of Dr Thoms were typical of the man. He always had a keen interest in mechanics and scientific research, and outside the regular routine of his work was often busy at something that would help in the general comfort and utility. The need of a telephone between the two mission houses, about two miles apart and separated by difficult mountain paths and an often dangerous sea, appealed to him strongly. He was able to interest a friend at home in the project, and the mission approving, no sooner had the material arrived than he started on its erection. The Sultan had kindly given him permission to use his poles for most of the way, but there was a short connection that needed to be made at each end. The Waly of Matrah, his staunch friend, told me that he could have had the loan of any number of men if he had asked. But Dr. Thoms loved to do things himself, and knowing he could do it better than anyone

³⁷ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 392.

³⁸ Just as easily, land was also reappropriated from the Arabian Mission. It has yet to be replaced, although the process has started.

*else at hand and having a just pride in mission work well done. After a full day's medical work, he attempted to tighten the wire at the top of a pole. Somehow he lost his balance, and falling from the ladder struck his head on the rocky ground, and never regained consciousness.*³⁹

In the short term after the death of Thoms, the medical work was carried on by Paul Harrison, who is remembered to this day for his work in Kuwait and Bahrain.⁴⁰ In 1939, Wells Thoms, the son of Sharon, took on the mantle of his father and served in Oman for many years.

The willingness of the Sultan to eventually permit the medical mission can be understood when set against the background of there being virtually no medical care or healthcare in the entire country, apart from that provided by the occasional doctor based at a diplomatic or military mission. The workload of the missionary doctors was impressive—even more so when you take into account the primitive work conditions, the absence of air conditioning and barely sanitary environments.

The women's hospital in Muscat opened with an average monthly treatment of 300 patients. By 1923, Dr Sarah Hosman was recording 850 patients a month.⁴¹ By 1960, the same women's hospital was treating '22,310 patients and 611 were delivered'.⁴²

Even on tour in the interior, the numbers treated by the missionaries reveal a heavy workload. Thus, in 1926, Dr Dame records: 'In a total of forty-five working days we were able to make 4,581 treatments in the dispensary and do 199 major and 303 minor operations.'⁴³

In 1944, the Sultan cautiously permitted the doctors to travel to Dhofar and, in the same year, the notorious Sheikh of the mountains invited him to visit.

The Sheikh of the Mountains where the writ of the Sultan of Muscat and Oman does not run. This Sheikh Sulaiman bin Hamyar rebelled against Muscat in 1913 when he threatened Muscat and Matrah but then withdrew and closed the

³⁹ Arabian Mission Field Reports, 1934, No. 85:4.

⁴⁰ Thompson, A. (2010). *The Christian Church in Kuwait: Religious Freedom in the Gulf*. Kuwait: Saeed & Samir.

⁴¹ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1923). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 125:14.

⁴² *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1960). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 248:7.

⁴³ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1926). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 138:11.

*border and kept it closed against all foreigners including US missionaries. So Dr. Thoms was taken aback when the Sheikh asked him to come every year for two months.*⁴⁴

By 1945, Dr Thoms wrote in his annual report:

*The statistics for Knox Memorial Hospital at Matrah and the Women's hospital in Muscat show a vast amount of work accomplished during the year. Total treatments, 59,467; operations, major, minor and eye, 1,255; inpatients 709, who spent an average of twenty days in hospital or a total of 15,000 days; injections giving 8,873, laboratory tests 830; fluoroscopic examinations 540.*⁴⁵

By 1949, the initial suspicions of the Sultan had been transformed into overt endorsement, and the mission reported: '[t]he Sharon Thoms Memorial Hospital for Contagious Diseases was officially opened on April 15th by Sayyed Said, the Sultan of Muscat and Oman, who had granted the large piece of land on which a seven-bed, cement block building for tuberculosis patients had been completed.'⁴⁶

By the late 1950s, the medical work had expanded to include a mission in the leper colony and a tuberculosis hospital. 'The general hospital reports that nearly 30,000 clinic patients, over 1400 inpatients. Hundreds of outcalls and hundreds of operations performed, a work load impossible to limit when there is no other place for people to go.'⁴⁷

Despite the emerging oil wealth, the people were not benefitting because the Sultan was exercising tight control. One of the missionary doctors described her frustrations of dealing with the Sultan at that time:

Sultan Saeed bin Taimur was getting money from the oil which had just been discovered there. It wasn't much, so he felt he could not start government health-care. He refused to befriend or even recognize Dr. Thoms because Wells helped and was friendly to some of the village chiefs who the sultan considered to be his enemies. Sultan Saeed really worked hard in his job of ruling. Everything had

⁴⁴ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1944). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. Page 6.

⁴⁵ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1945). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. 209:16.

⁴⁶ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1949). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. 216:14–15.

⁴⁷ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1959). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. 247:3.

*to have his formal written permission and his answer to most requests was 'No'. The mission had to ask to bring in needed staff or visitors, so we could not improve the care. Travel into the interior was forbidden. He wrote out what clothes women were allowed to wear. Women were not allowed to drive cars which was a nuisance as our men had to stop their work in order to drive us between the two hospitals. He kept his only son Qaboos, who had been educated in England under house arrest.*⁴⁸

RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY

A review of the newsletters sent home to the USA by the missionaries in Oman (now compiled into the volumes of *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling*) revealed that there were times of outright hostility.

Some of the negative encounters were a direct result of the insensitivity of the missionaries towards the religious sensibilities of the Omani Muslim population. For example, at great expense, the missionaries had imported an Arabic language printing press to mass print and distribute Christian propaganda to the local people. The following records their first attempt at printing and distributing:

Our printing press had for some time been waiting for suitable Arabic type. Finally we have a font of the Beyrout Arabic type and its 959 pieces arranged in eight huge cases, with almost as many for a capital font.

Some time ago a tract written by Dr. Rouse entitled 'Jesus or Mohammed' had been translated into Arabic, and we succeeded in printing 600 copies. The tract speaks plainly of Mohammed's sinfulness in contrast with the sinlessness of Christ and quotes the Koran in proof of the same.

We were careful in distributing the tract to give them only to the more liberal minded. But it proved too hard a blow for the fanaticism of some Shiabs and Wahabees.

*A copy of the tract was taken to the Sultan and read in the 'darbar' and on the plea that the tract would bring me in danger the Sultan requested that the American Consul prohibit its distribution and burn them.*⁴⁹

Unsurprisingly, the distribution of this tract brought trouble upon the colporteurs, who were usually Arab employees paid to sell and distribute the Bible and other Christian literature in the surrounding Omani villages.

⁴⁸ Allison, M.B. (1994). *Doctor Mary in Arabia*. Austin: University of Texas Press. Page 295.

⁴⁹ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1997). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 24:7.

The following account was brought back to the Mission by a colporteur who was selling Bibles in Sohar:

Then came men from the governor and two soldiers and forbade the people from buying by saying 'these are unbeliever's books' and they forbade me selling them and the people returned the books and took their value from me. Then a man tore up scripture before my face. Some reviled me and threatened me with a beating and one drew his knife to strike me, but the others held me and there was a great uproar in the street. I gathered up the torn leaves and moved to another part of town but they followed me, reviling me and threatening me and one drew his pistol.

The day did not get better as the colporteur continued:

What a bitter night I spent in that place, for soon a number of the rude people, small and great, men and women, boys and girls, came with great crying and surrounded the hut, throwing stones upon it, and because the hut was made of date branches it was being broken and falling upon us. When I went out to them they threw the books at us and threatened to beat me. They remained half the night and at last the owner of the hut rescued us, not from mercy but to save his property.⁵⁰

Opposition came often from the Mullahs (local religious leaders) and the teachers in the community who looked to them for guidance as to how to treat foreigners who came amidst them with new ideas and books. Dr Bennet saw that their influence could go either way. He complained: 'these religious teachers are the bane of our life in Oman, but also the means through which we often gain access to the people who are generally quite ignorant on points of religion, accepting without much question whatever is told them by these same Mullahs.'⁵¹

Anger was also directed at Muslims who decided to follow the creed of the missionaries and were thus seen to be apostates.

One example was the very public conversion of a high-profile Persian 'sayid' from India, 'despite knowing that this would bring him the intense hatred of the fanatical Shiah who had formerly kissed his hand as a repre-

⁵⁰ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1902). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. 41:11–12.

⁵¹ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1907). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. 19:4.

sentative of their prophet'.⁵² His open confession of Christ in the bazaar (an action encouraged by the missionaries), resulted in the crowds being provoked. 'As one man the whole bazaar rose against him and threatened to strip him of his sayid[']s costume and give the "dog of an infidel" a beating.'⁵³ At this point, the British consul became involved and he advised the Muslim convert to promptly leave the country.

The rueful admission by the missionaries that the sayid had made a mistake, by continuing to 'receive honours and charity as a "sayid" when he no longer adhered to Islam', is somewhat undermined by the following triumphalist statement that '[f]or a sayid to become a Christian is a death blow to Islam for tradition has it that this is impossible'.⁵⁴

RELIGIOUS RESPECT FROM IBADIS

The role of religion was not always a negative obstacle and respect was shown to the missionary doctors on a number of occasions and was expressed in religious terms.

For instance, on one trip Dr Thoms treated the then Imam of Nizwa who gave, as close as we can find, a theological justification for accepting the American Christians in his country:

In 1940, Dr Wells Thoms was invited into the interior to treat the Imam Mohammed al-Khalili, in his fort in Nizwa. The following account reveals something of the theology that the Imam employed in working out how he should respond to people outside of the Islamic faith. The missionaries had arrived at the fort for a rare trip into the Imam's centre of control and after the usual pleasantries the Imam began to ask many questions of the missionaries.

When we answered him that Jesus the Anointed one, whose followers we were, ordered his followers to all nations to teach men his doctrines, heal the sick and share with all men the good news of the Injiil (The Arabic word for the Gospel), he said 'do you believe that God is One?' When we said 'yes' he said you are not an idolater or kafir, you are 'people of the book'. We believe you are mistaken in some of your doctrines but we respect you because you fear God, the Praised and Exalted One; therefore you may proceed safely in our land. May God give you

⁵² *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1898). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 25:10.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 11.

*skill and wisdom to heal the sick man, I will send another guide to take you to your patient. This began a long and happy acquaintance with this most unusual Muslim spiritual leader.*⁵⁵

TOURING IN THE INTERIOR: TRIBAL CHALLENGES

The fame of Arab hospitality turned into a mixed blessing for the American Missionaries as Reverend Moerdyk observed:

*Hospitality is an overdone virtue in Oman and the Arabs especially pride themselves in this. Practically speaking, all the homes are open to the stranger and he is well entertained. This has its good side, giving abundant opportunity to the missionary; but there is a difficulty, too, because the host always expects a good gift in return for his trouble. In fact this is carried to such an extreme that I once heard it said that no decent person salutes except that he expects a present for his trouble. The missionary's tours, therefore, are expensive beside the trouble it gives him to select the presents and to carry them with him in travelling.*⁵⁶

Yet, all in all, the Christian experience of Arab hospitality was overwhelmingly appreciated and understood. How much of the hospitality code is rooted in the teachings of Islam is debatable, as the Bedouin code of hospitality predates Islam. This latter point was understood by the missionaries who wrote the following:

*Living conditions in a land of so much desert has made the law of hospitality an absolute necessity, and to extend it is an ingrained principle in any Arab. Because of this law the messengers of the Gospel have benefitted time and time again, when they as total strangers have been received with so much welcome.*⁵⁷

Touring in the interior was only made possible through a guarantee of safe conduct in the form of a letter written by the Sultan. In line with the experience of other travellers in the region, the failure to have such a guarantee meant that the traveller was at risk from hostile tribes. Even then, a letter may make no difference as Cantine discovered while touring in the interior:

⁵⁵ Phillips, W. (1967). *Oman: A History*. London: Longmans. Page 187.

⁵⁶ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1904). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 50:5.

⁵⁷ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1941). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 191:14.

I thought our future progress would be easy, but it was not so. For some reason either willingness to affront the Sultan whose recommendation I bore, or desire to repulse the English or for no other reason than their natural depravity, the Beni Ream utterly refused to allow me to enter into their territory. It was quite useless to tell them that I was not a consul ... that I knew their sheikh and had letters to him—they said they were free and independent Arabs and that their guns were loaded for any white men who came their way.⁵⁸

The lessons that the missionaries learnt from interior travelling was that ‘Oman is not an open territory, but as much closed as is any other part of interior Arabia; that touring, especially medical tours, is the only means of opening closed territories, and above all that once a territory is open to tours we must make repeated trips to that territory to keep it open’.⁵⁹

The territory that the missionaries were hoping would open up for them was a hotbed of conflict and violence. Westerners frequently interpreted the apparent Arab tribal tendency to primitive violence as a feature of their bestial natures. This orientalist perspective did not take into account the harsh terrain or that raiding by Bedouin tribes followed established codes of conduct which were necessary for their survival.⁶⁰

The history of Oman records a constant cycle of tribal conflict and a deeply fragmented society. In particular, there was conflict between the two largest tribes, the Ghafiri and the Hinawi clans. The latter tend to identify themselves with the Ibadi school of Islam, whereas the Ghafiri more commonly ally themselves with the Wahhabi school.⁶¹ ‘Serious internal strife occurred which ended only after every one of the more than 200 separate tribes in Oman attached itself to one of two great alliances of approximately equal strength.’⁶²

⁵⁸ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1901). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 39:15.

⁵⁹ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1926). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 138:12.

⁶⁰ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 8. Wellsted, J.R. (1840). *Travels to the City of Caliphs, along the Shores of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean*. London.

⁶¹ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 34–35. Heard-Bey, F. (2004). *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing. Hawley, D. (1989). *Oman and Its Renaissance*. London: Stacey International.

⁶² Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 35.

Sometimes the restrictions placed on the missionaries were a result of internal politics between the Sultan and other parties. The missionaries were well aware of these tensions and documented them. The following is an example:

*On another occasion I had a pleasant time with the Sultan's brother. There is the usual oriental jealousy and fear between them. It is said that they never see each other except in the presence of their followers, all armed—and the absence of the Sultan on a journey was my opportunity for calling at his brother's palace. He is better educated than the Sultan himself, and had displayed in a prominent place in his reception room a copy of the Bible and New Testament. He evidently wanted to impress me with his open-mindedness, but from his conversation, it was evident that his acquaintance with the contents of the books was very slight.*⁶³

This fleeting observation reveals that knowledge of the Christian faith was not really a main concern of the ruling family. Much more pressing were the local tribal dynamics which constantly threatened the existing status quo.

Open tribal warfare and conflict between the Sultan and the Imam led to blanket shutdowns on all movement within the country, leading to many hardships, not so much for the missionaries but for their patients. Dr Dame explains:

*The causes for the closing of Oman are purely political. The interior sheikhs, dissatisfied with the Sultan of Muscat, broke away from his rule and set up their own leaders appointed by an Imam or religious head and for years were at open enmity with the Sultan and the inhabitants of the strip of land along the coast known as the Batina.*⁶⁴

This led to the Sultan exercising his power by restricting the movements of the missionaries, especially from visiting his enemies. Dr Thoms writes: 'The Imam has twice sent urgent requests for me to treat him in his interior capital of Nizwa, but the Muscat government forbade me.'⁶⁵

⁶³ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1900). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. Page 9–10.

⁶⁴ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1926). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. 138:4.

⁶⁵ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1954). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition.* Oxford: Redwood. 235:17.

THE ARABIAN MISSION AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

This intermittent tribal warfare seems to have been a regular feature of Oman, leading an early observer from the mission to comment that ‘the people of Oman are, as a rule, illiterate and warlike, and suspicious of Europeans’.⁶⁶ The Omani suspicion of Westerners is quite understandable given their experience of the Portuguese occupation. Yet missionary efforts continued in spite of the hostility because, in comparison to other areas of the Gulf, they saw a great and effective door to Arabia through Muscat because of its ‘mild government under strong English political influence, it being the centre of trade and gossip. It was our endeavor, therefore, to attempt all things and expect all things.’⁶⁷

Sometimes, the hostility faced by the missionaries was set in the context of wider global events. With the rise of media communications, particularly radio broadcasts, Mr Dykstra, one of the missionaries, wrote that

*world news and politics are discussed and studied and a spirit of Arab nationalism and anti-western and anti-Christian tendencies is noticeable. Some of this helps our work and some of it hinders us. The Omani government itself has been rigorously attacked for being friendly to the Mission that it is now seeking opportunities to prove that it is not so friendly to us after all. As an instance of this may be cited the recent rescinding of a privilege which the Arabian Mission has enjoyed for so many years, namely, the privilege of freedom from customs duties.*⁶⁸

Oman was under British protection for most of the mission’s presence in Muscat and this sometimes provided complications for the missionaries in two directions. One was being linked, as Westerners, to the sometimes heavy-handed involvement of the Royal Navy, of which Reverend Van Peurseem wryly observed that ‘[o]ftentimes the tribes received the last word from the British in the form of a shell from a modern gunboat’.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1895). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 13:8.

⁶⁷ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1895). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 13:8.

⁶⁸ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1932). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 161:8–9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 162:10.

Along with the slave trade, the British were also active in patrolling the coast in order to protect their trading fleets from pirates. Another lucrative trade which the Sultan benefitted from was gunrunning. The missionaries noted that

[f]or years the large gun trade at Muscat has been a thorn in the flesh [on] the side of the Indian government, many of the arms eventually finding their way through Persia[] and Baluchistan to be used as occasion permits against the British frontier forces. Recently the Sultan of Muscat has been persuaded, for a consideration, to impose what are expected to be effective restrictions upon the sale of firearms in the city itself. This has greatly incensed the tribes inland, who have become quite modernized in their methods of killing each other, and they bitterly accuse His Highness of subserviency to an outside Christian nation, threaten revolt, and generally seem a bit lukewarm in their welcome to us. The Sultan also now fears that our presence inland might give color to the accusation that he has a non-Islamic policy. We therefore have thought it best to withdraw.⁷⁰

The other direction is that the British themselves were suspicious of the missionaries being possible agents of influence for America's foreign interests. The Arabian Mission's workers in Basra are well documented as representing America to the extent of even being their temporary consul.⁷¹ Other American missionaries were instrumental in using their good relationships with the local tribes in order to secure contracts for American oil companies, at the expense of their British competitors. Scudder notes that 'Arabian Mission personalities like John Van Ess, Paul Harrison and Henry Bilkert, among others[,] feared that the oil industry would introduce major destabilizing factors. ... Yet they aided and abetted the oil men.'⁷² Two of the biggest personalities in the search for oil were Frank Holmes⁷³ and Charles Crane. Both men spent much time with the Arabian mission-

⁷⁰ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1913). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 84:6.

⁷¹ Tejiran, E.H. & Simon, R.S. (2012). *Conflict, Conquest and Conversion: Two Thousand Years of Christian Missions in the Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press. Page 164.

⁷² Scudder R.L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans. Page 71.

⁷³ Chisholm, A.H.T. (1975). *The First Kuwait Oil Concession Agreement: A Record of negotiations 1911–1934*. London: Frank Cass.

aries. In fact, the Basra-based missionary, Henry Bilkert, was killed while on an oil-related expedition with Charles Crane. He was shot by a raiding Bedouin party.⁷⁴

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE ARABIAN MISSION

Some commentators point to the medical work of the missionaries as being the singular, most important contribution to the development of the church in Oman.⁷⁵

The influence of the hospitals at Muttrah and Muscat was felt across the jointly held territories of the Sultan and Imam, as people would undertake many days' travel in order to receive medical attention from the mission hospitals.⁷⁶ The *Neglected Arabia* journal records photographs of some of the unfortunate patients who travelled in the heat, by camel or donkey, across mountains and harsh terrain, in order to receive relief from their pain. In the Man Booker Award-winning novel of 2019, Omani author Jokha Alharthi describes how 'Thomas, the American missionary [...] was famous because he treated people's illnesses without taking any money. People lined up from dawn until late at night to see him.'⁷⁷

In truth the impact of the Mission went far beyond the walls of the hospitals.

In a poignant reflection on the golden anniversary of the Mission, Zwemer writes a summary of what had been accomplished in the first 50 years:

From 1889 until the present year, no less than eighty missionaries went to Arabia under our mission for longer or shorter terms of service. Seven hospitals have become centres for ever widening influence, so that in one year 237,000 received physicians' care. Hundreds of Arab children have gone out from our schools and have built of what they have learned of Christian teaching into the lives of their people. Tens of thousands of copies of the scriptures have been dis-

⁷⁴Scudder R.L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans. Page 72.

⁷⁵Skinner, R.F. (1992) *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press. Scudder R.L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans.

⁷⁶Skinner, R.F. (1992) *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press.

⁷⁷Alharthi, J. (2019) *Celestial Bodies*. (Trans Booth, M.) Dingwall, Scotland: Sandstone Press. Page 177. At the same time this novel also reveals some of the antipathy felt towards the missionaries by the Omanis. See pages 7 and 10.

*tributed and thousands of religious books to leaven the thought life of the Arabs. ... There is a marked decrease of fanaticism everywhere.*⁷⁸

The influence of the Mission also came in other ways, not least through the introduction of modern medicine, education and the pioneering use of technology. All this drew the fascination, support and sometimes superstitious fear of the local people. The Sultan himself endorsed the medical innovations brought into his country. Dr Thoms recalls that ‘the Sultan’s visit to inspect the X-ray machine was commemorated by an X-ray picture of his and the doctor’s hands in a firm and friendly clasp. An electric generator, the gift of Hope College students, supplied power for the entire hospital. An electric knife added greatly to the operating room equipment.’⁷⁹

Western technology continued to trickle in—a cause for comment by Zwemer when he describes the changes in his own career:

*Lastly, we now face entirely different conditions from those that existed fifty years ago. Everything has changed, except for the natural scenery and the climate. Even these have been modified by western civilisation and architecture. The camel has given way to the motor car; the palm tree is dwarfed by the wireless station; the radio set and the cinema are taking the place of the majlis and the coffee shop.*⁸⁰

The missionaries were a talented and resourceful group of people who applied themselves with intelligence and energy to all their tasks. Besides teaching and medical care, they were hands-on with building projects, often introducing new methods and ideas to the local people. So, when working on renovating their hospital, the Omanis observed that

*[t]he new mission building had three foot thick walls, made of hard brittle rock broken off the neighbouring mountainside, laid up in a mortar composed of mud with a little sprinkling of lime ... a half dozen iron beams, which excited the admiration and wonder of the natives from the interior.*⁸¹

⁷⁸ Zwemer, S. & Cantine, J. (1938). *The Golden Milestone: Reminiscences of Pioneer Days Fifty Years Ago in Arabia*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company. Page 140.

⁷⁹ *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1940). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 192:11.

⁸⁰ Zwemer, S. & Cantine, J. (1938). *The Golden Milestone: Reminiscences of Pioneer Days Fifty Years Ago in Arabia*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company. Page 144.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* Page 130.

Other innovations introduced into Oman by the missionaries included such wonders as a custom-built six-wheeled car.⁸²

The mission also encouraged the local economy through the use of modest start-up contributions, most often in the form of livestock. Mrs Thoms explained in the newsletter as follows:

*We long to help the people of Matrah economically, they are so poor. Most of them keep some poultry. Seeing this, we have brought some good poultry from India. From what we have now we have been able to give out White Leghorn eggs for hatching. Larger hens and larger eggs bring bigger prices for the same effort expended. One woman was able to secure a good price for ducklings that hatched out from eggs I gave her. This poultry hobby, since it is one in common with our poorest neighbours, gives us an absorbing mutual interest.*⁸³

The impact of the American Mission on Christian-Muslim relations is significant. The memories of the Omani people both on the coast and in the interior is one of deep abiding affection. The Director of the Al Amana Centre, which traces its origins back to the slave school started by Peter Zwemer, recalled in 2014 how he and an American student were travelling through the interior when the student required urgent medical attention at a local village clinic. When the villagers heard that they were linked with the American Mission they came in their droves to visit and support the two Americans as they recuperated. The Director recalls with amazement the latent gratitude for the memories of the American medical tours which came into the interior from the Mission's Muttrah hospital.⁸⁴

This reflected a similar experience decades earlier, when Wells Thoms travelled to the interior at the request of the Imam and discovered that the wife of his guide had been treated by Thoms' father some 28 years earlier. 'When I told her he was my father, she wept for joy. She said they had never known a man like him.'⁸⁵

⁸² Harrison, T.S. (2008) "Memories of an American Missionary Family in the Persian Gulf." *The Joint Archives Quarterly*. Vol 18. No. 3. Page 1–10.

⁸³ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1942). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 196:19.

⁸⁴ Interview with DL in 2016.

⁸⁵ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1943). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. Vol 1:3.



CHAPTER 7

Trade and Rentierism

Commerce and trade bring people together; one important factor to consider is how these activities impact Christian-Muslim relations.

The long history of trading in Oman, particularly with Western and ‘Christian’ nations suggests an ethos of tolerance which has laid the groundwork for the experience of the church today.

The presence of the church before 1970 was really limited to the Arabian Mission, some diplomats and soldiers and around seventy (maximum) Omanis and Arab expatriates who attended the Mission chapel. When we look at the economic factors before 1970, we find that Christians who lived in the region were not participants in any major trade. The Hindus and other religious groups from India were more dominant because of their historical trading relationship with the Omanis. There was also a Jewish community who enjoyed the goodwill of the Omani people. In 1884, a British missionary called Jacob Samuel recorded in his *Journal of a Missionary Tour through the Deserts of Arabia to Baghdad* how he had the opportunity to preach ‘to twelve Jews assembled for the Passover, and found that about 350 Jewish families resided in the Batinah. In addition, Muscat had the only Islamic Government tolerating Banian temples.’¹

The Sultan and the Omani people benefitted from the Christian Arabian Mission in terms of their medical care, and it is suggested that the appreciation underlying this humanitarian care fostered a religious tolerance

¹ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. Page 14.

which was nonetheless a vulnerable one. The Sultan could revoke or impose travel restrictions on the missionaries on a whim (and it is recorded that this happened regularly for one reason or another). The economic contribution of the Christian residents was minimal and the economy as a whole was based on trade and barter without any real centralised control or established mode of production.

Travellers and explorers who visited Oman during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries described the trading activity of Oman as diverse. For instance, Abraham Parsons, who visited Muscat in August 1775 on a British Royal Navy ship, described camel caravans who brought ‘ostrich feathers, cattle hides, sheep skins, honey, and beeswax, taking back with them cutlery, toys, spices, rice, sugar, coffee and tobacco. The trade with Mocha was enormous. Muscat sent 20,000 bales of coffee every year to Basra.’²

In 1791, Captain Mathew Jenour noted that the Omanis traded mainly in ‘locally grown coffee and pearls’.³ In the Muscat souq, Dr William Samuel Ruschenberger saw ‘swords from Persia and England being traded, along with corn, pepper, senna-leaves, cloves and other spices, rosebuds, antimony pencils and glass beads’.⁴ The international scale of trade is captured best by the Royal Navy officer, lieutenant James Raymond Wellsted, who observed in his *Travels in Arabia*⁵ that the people of Muscat

*are of a mixed race, the descendants of Arabs, Persians, Indians[,] Syrians by the way of Baghdad and Basrah, Kurds, Afghans, Beluches who have settled here ... for the purpose of commerce. ... On commerce, the coffee trade is in the hands of the Banians, and is said to be very lucrative. The pearl fisheries in the Gulf are estimated to be forty lakhs annually, and nearly two-thirds of that produce are brought hither in small boats and then conveyed to Bombay in ships or baggalas. In Bombay the Parsees are the principal purchasers and a great many of them are sent by them to China. Muscat yields few exports ... the principal are dates taken to India ... red dye is sold to India, shark fins to China and salt fish to India. The return for these articles are made principally in bullion and coffee.*⁶

² Ibid. Page 8.

³ Ibid. Page 9.

⁴ Ibid. Page 15.

⁵ London 1938.

⁶ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. Page 17.

All this trade allowed Muscat and other coastal towns to become cosmopolitan centres of tolerance, fostered by the necessity of trade, although this tolerance was not normally present in the interior (as there was less exposure to foreigners there). The openness to foreigners in the port cities, however, did benefit the American Christian missionaries and gave them a foothold which would not have been possible in the interior region of Oman.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

When it comes to academic studies of the Arabian Gulf States, the prevailing theory to explain social, political and economic behaviour is Rentier State Theory. Evidence on the ground suggests that economic forces play a role in accommodating the needs of a diverse workforce. The declining dominance of the hydrocarbon industry potentially means the need for a more diverse economy. This necessitates a broader skills base, which as yet is not owned by the local population at a level which would enable self-sufficiency. In short, Arabian Gulf States will remain dependent on imported labour and the depleting of oil reserves will impact political and economic behaviour. Rentier State Theory predicts this.

In her fascinating anthropological research, Limbert captures the anxiety of Omani society regarding the oil industry:

Over and over during my time in Oman, people would tell me that the country had twenty years of oil reserves remaining, a time frame, as I illustrate has been projected by the media since the 1970s, but crucially, the horizon of the exhaustion of the country's oil supply keeps extending into the future. Even the US State Departments of Energy in 2005 predicted that Oman had about twenty years of oil remaining.⁷

The significance of this economic narrative suggests a push for a more diverse economy, which in turn led to a diverse religious population, creating a demand to provide for their spiritual needs to be met within the context of Ibadi society. Yet, in the current declining economy, along with an increasing unemployment rate, there is a growing call for expatriates to

⁷ Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Pages 7–8.

leave the country so that their jobs can be assumed by the local people. In practice, people are leaving, but are not being replaced. So far, the trials and frustrations of the economy have not been framed within a religious discourse.

RENTIER STATE THEORY

The prevailing (and evolving) sociological theory for understanding social dynamics in the Arabian Gulf is Rentier State Theory.⁸ Rentier State Theory was popularised by Mahdavy's⁹ study of Iran and was further developed by Beblawi and Luciani,¹⁰ Hertog¹¹ and Gray.¹² In essence, the theory proposes that the lucrative oil and gas economies have empowered an elite to control their societies according to their whim. This theory is derived from Marxian dialectics, where in 1860 Marx discussed the observation that there is a privileged ruling class who benefit from renting out property and thus gain capital without actually producing anything or being engaged in labour.¹³ Coming back to the theory itself, the literature generally suggests that in an Arabian Gulf context, the hydrocarbon industry has created rentier states across the region, where privileged ruling tribal families effectively act as bourgeoisie elites in the form of neopatriarchy.¹⁴ A crude portrayal of Gulf politics is that the rulers 'buy out' their citizens in a ruling bargain which promises a share in and access to wealth in exchange for their submission and commitment to maintaining

⁸ Davidson, C.M. (2012). *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst & Company. Foley, S. (2010). *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

⁹ Mahdavy, H. (1970) "The Patterns and Problems in Economic Rentier States: The Case of Iran" Found in Cook, M.A. *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Beblawi, H. & Luciani, G. (1990) *The Rentier State in the Arab World*. London: Routledge.

¹¹ Hertog, S. (2010) *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and State in Saudi Arabia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

¹² Gray, M. (2011). "A Theory of Late Rentierism in the Arab States of the Gulf" *Georgetown University Centre for International and Regional Studies Occasional Papers*, No. 7.

¹³ Davidson, C.M. (2012). *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst & Company. Page 6.

¹⁴ Sharabi, H. (1992). *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the status quo—or to restate in Vandewalle’s memorable formulation—‘the reverse principle of no representation without taxation’.¹⁵ Rentier State Theory has also been used to describe the perpetuation of tribal patriarchal culture.¹⁶

The concept of rentierism came to be applied particularly to the Arabian Gulf. Commins highlights three features of the rentier state. ‘First, there is the provision of economic necessities and free infrastructure including housing, health, education, social security and jobs. Second is the employment of foreign labour to do menial tasks, or bring specialist skills not owned by the locals. Third[], there is considerable pressure on the state to maintain the level of provision, for decline could lead to the threat of discontentment, resulting in rebellion.’¹⁷ To minimise the threat of disloyalty, the ruling families create a narrative which justifies their legitimacy. To this end the religion of Islam is subverted in order to win compliance from their subjects.

Rentier state processes are typified by the ‘creation of a primary commodity export economy dependent on the importation [of] foreign capital equipment creating and perpetuating a situation of underdevelopment’.¹⁸ The whole economic edifice in a rentier economy therefore serves the interests of a small elite who rent out their assets to beneficial parties. There is little interest in sharing the resources of the modes of production in a manner that would enrich the whole population. Thus the ‘cheap cost of labour in these countries come[s] from the super-exploitation, not only of the labour from the wage-earner himself, but the labour of his kin group’.¹⁹

Rentier State Theory would seem to support Weberian analysis, in which lies the premise that the economy and religion of a society are intricately bound in a union which shapes the destiny of its members. Rentier State Theory implies that the more control the ruling family has over the main mode of production, the less social liberties, including religious

¹⁵ Ibid. Page 160.

¹⁶ Ross, M. (2008). “Oil, Islam and Women”. *American Political Science Review* 102, No. 1.

¹⁷ Commins, D. (2012). *The Gulf States: A Modern History*. London: I.B. Tauris. Page 203.

¹⁸ Cockcroft, D. Frank, A.G. & Johnson, D.L. (1972). “The Development of Underdevelopment” in *Dependence and Underdevelopment: Latin America’s Political Economy*. Garden City: Anchor Books.

¹⁹ Meillassoux, C. (1972). “From Reproduction to Production.” *Economy and Society*. 1, no 1: Page 103.

freedoms, are enjoyed by the members of their societies. Empirical studies seem to bear this out.²⁰ Oil wealth has been described as a ‘resource curse’ in that many rentier states have a negative economy due to misappropriation or mismanagement of funds by the state.²¹ A casual observer of the Arabian Gulf may see this as an evident phenomenon. Saudi Arabia, where the house of Saud has exclusive control of the oil revenue and oversees an economy which is heavily dependent on the hydrocarbon industry, has the most oppressive policies and relations with regard to the non-Muslim expatriate community. Religious freedom is greatly restricted for both non-Muslim communities and other Islamic traditions which do not subscribe to the Wahhabi school. No churches are allowed to publicly worship, and as such are driven ‘underground’, that is, meeting in private homes, or in compounds managed by foreign companies. In contrast, the Emirate of Dubai (part of the United Arab Emirates) has a rapidly depleting oil supply and so has moved to diversify the economy through promoting free market capitalism and enterprise. This means less state control over the economic modes of production and the result is the largest number of church buildings and compounds to be found anywhere in the Arabian Gulf.

However, the real picture is more complex. Qatar, for example, shares the same Islamic epistemology as Saudi Arabia; the ruling family has very real control of the oil assets. And yet, it has recently agreed to permit the building of Christian churches. Oman, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, has a more diverse economy in which the oil revenues provide a smaller percentage of the overall income—yet it retains a high level of control over religious communities, albeit in a discrete way. The Omani model encourages the churches to collaborate with the government, for example by advising them on who should be given visas as religious leaders in the

²⁰ Buckley, D.T. & Mantilla, L.F. (2013) “God and Governance: Development, State Capacity, and the Regulation of Religion”. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 52 (2) pp. 328–348. Alkhater, K.R. (2012). “The Rentier Predatory State Hypothesis: An Empirical Explanation of the Resource Curse”. *Journal of Economic Development*. Vol 37, No. 4, pp. 29–60. Tarzi, S.M. & Schackow, N. (2012). “Oil and Political Freedom in Third World Petro States: Do Oil Prices and Dependence on Petroleum Exports Foster Authoritarianism?” *Journal of Third World Studies*. Vol. XXIX. No 2, pp. 231–250.

²¹ Alkhater, K.R. (2012). “The Rentier Predatory State Hypothesis: An Empirical Explanation of the Resource Curse”. *Journal of Economic Development*. Vol 37, No. 4, pp. 29–60. Azreki, R. & Ploeg, F. (2007). “Can the Natural Resource Curse be Turned into a Blessing? The Role of Trade Policies and Institutions”. IMF Working Paper, 07/55. Damania, R. & Bulte, E. (2008). “Resources for Sale: Corruption, Democracy and the Natural Resource Curse”. *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis and Policy*. 8 (10), pp. 1890–1895.

Christian community. The increasing complexity over control of religious freedoms has led one Omani scholar to posit that Arabian Gulf States are now in a post-rentier economy, in which the threat of diminishing oil supplies is enforcing the diversity of modes of production.²² Al-Farsi highlights the trend of a rapidly expanding and increasingly educated local population expecting to have the same lifestyle as their parents during the oil boom years. The inability of the state sector to keep offering lifetime employment means that the private sector will become increasingly important to the economy, especially in terms of employment. This means ‘the consequential growth of associations, syndicates and unions, together with calls for political reforms, signals a great change in the existing social contract, and thus a significant challenge to the legitimacy of rentier state structures’.²³ With the private sector being largely run by expatriates, concessions given to private business owners by the state, in return for employing more Arabian Gulf nationals, will most likely include greater religious freedom. One pre-oil state mechanism, which is already in the process of being modified and adapted to meet the demands of a changing economy, has been identified by Al-Farsi²⁴ as the *shura*—a tribal forum in which consensus was traditionally sought through a gathering of the tribal elders. The *shura* is invested with Islamic significance as this was the means by which the successor to the Prophet was chosen.

Another aspect, which has yet to be explored in any depth, is the intra-religious discourse which takes place within GCC states, that is the relationship between the different sects of Islam. In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the intra-religious dialogue is infamously defined by oppressive policies, by which Sunni authorities oppress the substantial Shia communities under their rule.

Thus, Rentier State Theory is evolving in recognition that the ruling bargain concept is too simple to explain the emerging capitalist market, as seen in Dubai, for example. Gray²⁵ describes the increasing institutionalisation of Gulf countries, as infrastructure in the form of government ministries

²² Al-Farsi, S. (2013). *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman*. London: I.B. Tauris.

²³ Al-Farsi, S. (2013). *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman*. London: I.B. Tauris. Page 2.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Gray, M. (2011). “A Theory of Late Rentierism in the Arab States of the Gulf” *Georgetown University Centre for International and Regional Studies Occasional Papers*, No. 7.

flourish, resulting in what he describes as ‘late rentierism’. Gray also observes the overt globalisation seen in the Arabian Gulf in terms of an opening market, a trend which is described by some as neoliberalism, resulting in an ‘emerging city-corporation’.²⁶ Yet, despite the diversifying of the economy, the emergence of entrepreneurialism and a global corporate culture, democracy and religious freedom remain elusive.

While class-based politics, labour unions and even tribal affiliations would fail to gain traction in a rentier economy, Luciani does identify one factor which would potentially challenge the status quo—religion. He suggests that

*in rent based societies parties will develop only to represent cultural or ideological orientations. In practice, Islamic fundamentalism appears to be the only rallying point around which something approaching a party can form in the Arab allocation states.*²⁷

With the current unrest across the region, particularly the Sunni-Shia conflict, there is a growth of literature on the role of religion, especially sectarian Islam.²⁸ The role of religion, which is often acknowledged in Rentier State Theory as a side player, is being increasingly evaluated. Foley argues that the Rentier State Theory needs to be revisited, adopting a fresh theoretical approach which takes our understanding of Arabian Gulf societies beyond oil and Islam.²⁹ He points to the prevalence of other religious communities, especially among expatriate societies, which have coexisted alongside Islam for centuries in some cases, as in Oman with her extensive maritime history with India and Zanzibar. Foley argues that

many of the critical challenges that Gulf states face in the twenty-first century (religious tensions, the role of gender and existential questions of identity) predate the discovery of oil in 1930 and reflect[] centuries-old social and

²⁶Kanna, A. (2010). “Flexible Citizenship in Dubai: Neoliberal Subjectivity in the Emerging ‘City Corporation’”. *Cultural Anthropology*. Vol 25, Issue 1. Page 108.

²⁷Luciani, G. (1990). *The Arab State*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Page 74.

²⁸Potter, L.G. (ed). (2013). *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*. London: Hurst & Company. Matthiesen, T. (2013). *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that Wasn’t*. Stanford: Stanford Briefs. Ulrichsen, K.C. (2011). *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*. London: Hurst & Company. Davidson, C.M. (ed). (2011) *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst & Company.

²⁹Foley, S. (2010). *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

*cultural factors in the Gulf. Among the most important of these factors are tribal and local customs, patron-client relationships, commercial networks, the hajj, geographic and environmental constraints, familial traditions of governance, and religious and cultural tolerance.*³⁰

Rentier State Theory predicts that oil economies would become oppressive in nature, and that there would be high control of any potential threats, of which religion would be seen as a main suspect in any potential social disorder.

Using Iraq as an example, Noah Feldman, another commentator and expert on Islam and democracy, highlights the difference between rentier economy Arab states and Muslim monarchs in the Arabian Gulf and other Arab states without a ruling family. He asserts that

*[a]n oil dictator, in other words, who collects the rent on his oil exports, then uses it to rule, lacks the handful of incentives to democratize that apply to dictators without oil. Within the category of dictatorships the presence of oil makes democratization less likely. Compared with an oil monarch, an oil dictator is not very susceptible to internal pressure from Islamist groups. Unlike a Muslim Monarch, a dictator does not need to have a claim to legitimacy rooted in Islam or in local traditions.*³¹

So without tribal or religious sanction, rulers in oil rentier states would need to depend heavily on a strong security apparatus. Yet, as Foley points out, the experience of living in the Arabian Gulf is not the same as living in a police state, where the security apparatus is visible and feared (with the main exceptions being Saudi Arabia and Iraq).

Rentier State Theory also does not account for the prevalence of minority faith communities, nor does it account for life in the Arabian Gulf before oil, leading one scholar³² to agree with Foley that a historical approach must be included to account for pre-oil factors. Yom examines historical events of conflict and the strategies used by ruling tribes to negotiate crisis in particular. He concludes that these historical strategies continue to be perpetuated in a modified form through the rentier model.

³⁰ Ibid. Page 4.

³¹ Feldman, N. (2003). *After Jihad: America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Page 175.

³² Yom, S.L. (2011) "Oil, Coalitions, and Regime Durability: The Origins and Persistence of Popular Rentierism in Kuwait". *St Comp International Development*. 26: 217–241.

Other scholars would agree with him. For example, Kamrava, in discussing Qatar, observes that 'rentierism did not create new patterns of rule from scratch, it reinforced existing ones'.³³ Others disagree. Ismael, for instance, argues that

*[t]here is an apparent hard and fast break between the social structure of pre-oil Kuwait and that of affluent Kuwait. With the emergence of oil as the principal source of wealth, the forces of production within Kuwait underwent a sudden and radical transformation.*³⁴

Oman provides an even more complex example; the modes of economic production, while often typified as a subsistence economy, are far more nuanced. For example, 'Sohar and Sur are known for boat construction, Nizwa for silverwork, Samayil for textiles and Bahla for pottery'.³⁵ This is in addition to a feudalistic landownership, in which the scarce resource of water irrigated crops through a sophisticated system of *falaj* (underground canals). Ownership and control of these different economies were deeply fractured.³⁶ Drawing on the work of Ibn Khaldun, Khuri argues that an important institution to factor in with regard to understanding religious and economic behaviour is *asabiya*.

*Asabiya, derived from asab (meaning nerve), signifies internal cohesion, often brought about by unity of blood or faith. In a state setting, unity is brought about through the use of force; but in an asabiya setting, it arises voluntarily through the sharing of moral bonds; blood, descent, marriage, ethnic origin, tribal affinity, faith or through some or all of these mixed together. ... Sectarian asabiya, derived from unity of religious beliefs and practices is one of three types. An asabiya arrangement is always distinguished by two criteria. First, the element of exclusiveness, the group's image of itself as unique; and second, the non-hierarchical structure of its authority. ... Suffice to say that all sects believe, each in its own way, that they have a special role to play, a special message to deliver, and that they are the last to have signed the divine covenant with God.*³⁷

³³ Kamrava, M. (2013). *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*. London: Cornell University Press. Page 130.

³⁴ Ismael, J.S. (1993). *Kuwait: Dependency and Class in a Rentier State*. Florida: University Press of Florida. Page 12.

³⁵ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. Page 76.

³⁶ Ibid. Page 76.

³⁷ Ibid. Pages 52–53.

The role of tribes in the Gulf economy is one that needs further research, especially in Oman, in which tribal heritage is a dominant form of *asabiya*. Many a sect traces its descent to a specific set of tribal strains. For example, the bulk of the Ibadis in Oman trace their origin to the various factions of the Hinawi tribe.³⁸

Fox et al.³⁹ also challenge the prevalent belief in sociological theories that religion and economy are the only actors which shape Gulf culture. In the article ‘The Arab Gulf: Traditionalism Globalized or Globalization Traditionalized’, they argue that the economy and even religion have been shaped by more deep-rooted institutions such as tribalism and patriarchalism. Attitudes moulded during the pre-oil era continue to be manifest in the current oil economy.

For example, the pearl-diving industry was the main source of income before oil institutionalised indentured labour. Divers going out to sea for the annual pearl dive would place themselves in debt of the captain of the boat in the hope that they would be able to pay the debt off with the fruits of their dives. It was a high-risk gamble, the odds of finding a pearl which would generate enough wealth to pay off the debt was low. Subsequently, there arose a class of people who were perpetually in debt and therefore indentured to their employers. Underscoring this culture of bondage, Dresch and Piscatori wrote that the pearling industry was

*built on debt bondage and indentured labour, where historically a diver in debt needed his captain's release to work for another or face arrest for absconding. The labour market was regulated by freezing the labourer in his relationship to one employer. ... This system of private policing most probably deterred criminal behaviour among expatriates, but it also facilitated criminality among sponsors.*⁴⁰

The institutionalised ‘indebting’ of the pearl-diving industry continues to be manifest through passports being held illegally by employers as collateral against debt, and salaries being withheld so that labourers continue to be indentured or enslaved in debt to their overseers. Absconding is still a criminal offence and only recently have there been changes in legislation

³⁸ Wilkinson, J.C. (1979). ‘The Origins of the Omani State’. *Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics*. Hopwood, D. (ed). London: George Allen & Unwin. Pages 76–83.

³⁹ Fox, J.W. et al. (2006) *Globalization in the Gulf*. London: Routledge.

⁴⁰ Dresch, P. & Piscatori, J. (eds). (2013). *Monarchies and Nations. Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*. London: I.B. Tauris. Page 57.

which allow an employee to change companies without punitive measures being applied to them.⁴¹

A brief historical survey shows that the main economy of Oman has been dominated by the sale of frankincense, pearls, African slaves, weapons and latterly oil and gas. The historical control of all these industries has remained in the hands of an elite tribe or family. In other words, even before the prevailing oil industry, the cultural and economic climate favoured the emergence of a rentier economy.

Rentier State Theory proposes that the main factor influencing inter- and intra-community relations is economic power. While most studies of the Arabian Gulf accent the relationship between oil and Islamic authority, the former financing and legitimising the latter, later studies call for a deeper analysis and understanding of multiple factors which in particular shape the religious freedoms experienced by the expatriate community in the Gulf.

Gulf countries, for example, tend to use their petrodollars in order to find and consolidate their place in the global economy. Kamrava describes the processes currently taking place in these countries:

*The ensuing financial influence has bought the GCC states active membership and influence in international financial institutions such as the World Trade Organization. The GCC states have also begun taking proactive steps in reshaping the institutional design of global frameworks of governance. According to one observer, membership in such international forums enables the GCC to benchmark domestic governance to international standards, while participation in an international rules-based system introduces a new dynamic to domestic reform processes. It also enhances regional familiarity with global values and helps to embed them in local discourses while situating Gulf states' views of global governance.*⁴²

Yet, Kamrava also noted that oil wealth was being deployed to allow small GCC countries the means to exercise what he called 'subtle power'. The GCC states, particularly Qatar, cannot compete with other nations in

⁴¹ Dresch, P. (2006). "Foreign Matter: The Place of Strangers in Gulf Society" found in Fox, J.W. et al. (2006) *Globalization in the Gulf*. London: Routledge. Kamrava, M. (2012a) *Migrant Labour in the Persian Gulf*. London: Hurst & Company. Kapiszewski, A. (2001). *Nationals and Expatriates: Population and Labour Dilemmas of the Gulf*. Dryden, NY: Ithaca Press. Longva, A.N. (1999). *Walls Built on Sands: Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

⁴² Kamrava, M. (2013). *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*. London: Cornell University Press. Page 34.

terms of population size or the ability to project military capabilities. Rather, they are competing in the realm of foreign policy, through careful and strategic financial investments and by inserting themselves as mediating partners in various political causes, most notably the Palestinian cause.

Another example of ‘subtle power’ is the

*establishment of world-class airlines that are playing critical roles in the facilitated linkages between financial and industrial hubs in the East and the West. Etihad, Emirates and Qatar Airways have all emerged as super-connectors capable of connecting any two parts of the world with one stopover in the Persian Gulf.*⁴³

All of this is leading to a discourse from Gulf States which embraces the plurality of the global community. This discourse is becoming more and more visible. Consider the words of His Highness Sheikh Nahyan, the Minister for Culture, Youth and Social Development for the United Arab Emirates, in his foreword for the book *Christianity in the UAE*:

*Uniting people of differing faiths, finding common ground among those who come from different cultural traditions, harnessing the core values that are common to all religions—these principles are consistent with the aims of the United Arab Emirates. Following the vision of our Founding President, the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, and continuing under the wise leadership of His Highness the President of the UAE and Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan, the UAE has committed itself to bridging the gaps that separate people of different cultures, and discovering and celebrating the bonds that unite them. We believe strongly that honest, good faith dialogue among dedicated individuals and organizations representing people of diverse religions, cultures, beliefs and backgrounds can help make this a better, more peaceful and more prosperous world.*⁴⁴

Religious freedom therefore is seen as part of the bargain in participating in and benefitting from the global economy. To achieve economic success, religious freedom also fosters a commitment from governments to oppose religious extremism in all its forms. To this end, ruling authorities readily give a platform to religious scholars who promote an Islamic view of pluralism thus ensuring their ongoing prosperity and political stability.

⁴³ Ibid. Page 35.

⁴⁴ Thompson, A. (2014). *Jesus of Arabia*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing. Page 5.



CHAPTER 8

State Governance of the Church

So how does the Christian community relate to the government? What influence does Sultan Qaboos have on the experience of the Church in Oman?

A letter from Sultan Qaboos records the appreciation of the Omani people for the work of the Mission hospital:

In recognition of the humane and valuable assistance, which by the selfless endeavour of your Mission has been available to our people in such generous measure over the years, we wish to inform you of our gratitude in the past and open support in the future.¹

The letter goes on to inform the Mission that there would be no customs duty to be imposed on any goods, medicines and other articles required by the missionaries. Furthermore, the Sultan promised financial assistance by investing in the premises of the medical complexes. The letter closes with clear parameters set out by the Sultan, who instructs the Mission thus:

We feel sure that you will always bear in mind that being a Moslem country we do not accept public evangelism of other faiths and, despite our stated intention

¹ Private letter from Sultan Qaboos sent to the Chief Administrator of the American Mission in Muscat dated 15 August 1970. A copy of this letter from the document collection of this researcher.

of encouraging you in the vital and humane work you are carrying out in the field of health we must make it clear to your Mission that public evangelism is forbidden.²

The timing of this letter is significant. Sultan Qaboos had been enthroned only 1 month earlier (23 July 1970). He is quick then to affirm the medical work of the Mission and sees the value that they give to the Omani people. It was alleged at the time of his ascending the throne that there were only two hospitals³ in the country. It was essential that he be seen to begin his rule with some rudimentary healthcare still in place, and he encouraged the Mission to expand their healthcare provision with his direct investment. The economic aspirations of the young Sultan led him to address the Christian zeal of the missionaries by bluntly insisting that they resist from public evangelism. The ruling bargain was clear—you can have a Christian presence as long as you do not offend the traditions and expectations of the people. The culture of shame and honour meant that the missionaries had to avoid anything that would damage the Sultan's commitment to the Islamic faith of his people. Failure to maintain this meant that the Sultan would have had no choice but to close the hospitals and remove the presence of the missionaries altogether.

² Ibid., p. 2.

³ B.R. Pridham, a former soldier and British Foreign Office diplomat turned academic, records the following: 'Although the general charge against Sultan Sa'id is that medical services barely existed until 1970, there have been varying estimates of the scale of deprivation. We have statements that there were only two hospitals in the country, that there was only one, and that there was none at all run by the Ministry of Health. Estimates of health centres similarly ranged from nil upwards, Hospital beds were thought to be as few as 12, even though that figure seems excessive from a source which believes there were no hospitals or health centres. It is also maintained that there was no preventative medicine or public health facilities.

The reality was rather different. Only one post-1970 official publication out of many came closer to the truth by recording that in 1970 there were five hospitals, 39 clinics and dispensaries, 276 beds, 33 doctors and ancillary health workers. American missionaries of the Dutch Reformed Church opened their first hospital in Oman 1892 and continuously maintained one after 1907. By 1954 their hospital in Muttrah had 150 beds and their women's hospital in Muscat 75 beds. There were in addition, the British Consulate Hospital in Muscat with 12 beds (a charitable foundation providing treatment to all), the hospital of the Evangelical Mission in Buraimi, two military hospitals and the oil company hospital with 20 beds' (found in Netton, I.R. (1986) *Arabia and the Gulf: From Traditional Society to Modern States*. London: Croom Helm, 1986, p. 140).

The prestige of the Arabian Mission was further enhanced by the recognition of the work of Dr Don Bosch. As a specialist surgeon who worked in Oman for most of his medical career, he saved many lives at a time when medical services were limited. He was the first American to be awarded the Order of Oman by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said in 1972 for his service to the country. In addition, upon his retirement the Sultan ordered that the Bosch family have a retirement home built in their favourite cove, where they used to collect seashells (Don Bosch is a published conchologist).⁴

The Church was allegedly set up by a royal decree⁵ as a partnership between the Anglican and Reformed Church in America (RCA) denominations. No previous Sultan had allowed such a platform for a visible church. To understand the wide range of the present Sultan's power and influence, the following quote is revealing:

The monarch holds concurrently the positions of Head of State, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Minister of Foreign Affairs.⁶

Indeed, the influence of the Sultan, unlike the other ruling families in the Gulf region was absolute. As Herb wryly comments: '[w]hile the Al Saud rule Saudi Arabia, and the Al Sabah Kuwait, Qaboos rules Oman.'⁷

The church buildings are clearly visible, and Christians are seen in the public domain—for example, church choirs have the freedom to sing Christmas carols in some of the big hotel lobbies. The churches are also allowed to advertise their services through pages of local media and Internet websites.

The main church site is in Ruwi, where a Roman Catholic Church and a Protestant Church share a large compound. This was built around a British military graveyard, which is the resting place for casualties of the fighting in Oman during the 1950s and 1960s. The construction of a church around

⁴ Bosch, D. (1989) *Seashells of Southern Arabia*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing. Also Bosch, D. (1982). *Seashells of Oman*. London: Longman Group.

⁵ Historical documents in the Church archives contain the land deeds and a series of letters between the church leaders and the Sultan's court—but there is no copy of a royal decree.

⁶ Valeri, M. (2017). *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*. London: Hurst & Company, p. 3.

⁷ Herb, M. (1999). *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*. New York: State University of New York Press, p. 145.

this graveyard suggests that one of the reasons the Sultan permitted a church in Oman was as a form of recognition of the international political and military partnerships which enabled him to come to power and sustain his rule.

Likewise, down in Salalah (where the British had special forces based during the first turbulent decade of the Sultan's rule), the Sultan gave land for an ecumenical Christian project, in which once again the Roman Catholic Church rubs shoulders with the Protestants week on week in their worship services, held mainly on Fridays.

This ecumenical dimension is in fact unique to Oman. Nowhere else in the Gulf has a ruler decreed that there must be a partnership between the different churches when it comes to the sharing of land and decision-making structure. In an interview with a prominent regional leader of the RCA, it was stated: 'the Sultan was convinced that ecumenism was important and he chose the Anglican and the Reformed Church in America to form an equal partnership.'⁸ As it turned out, this proved to be a happy arrangement, mainly because the two parties already had a track record of ecumenical partnerships. Another possible reason suggested as to why these parties were favoured by the Sultan is that he saw them as Christian parallel to his own Ibadi Islam in terms of their moderate and middle-way approach to their co-religionists. As a bishop suggested,

*[o]ur churches try to be a bridge to other churches of different Christian traditions and I think the Ibadis do the same. For example their intra-faith dialogues in which they engage with Shia and Sunni about many political (not just religious) subjects from a position in which they are open and moderate towards the other streams of Islam mirrors the work of the Anglican church in her ecumenical relations with the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox.'*⁹

When answering the question 'Why did the Sultan choose this partnership?', the most obvious suggestion is that he wanted to honour the work of the RCA and also honour the British with whom he and his family have had such long relations. One expatriate who grew up in Oman recalled that 'the Sultan had a soft spot for the British Anglican church because of a vicar and his family who cared for him when he studied at the school in the UK. They became his surrogate parents and he had a very positive

⁸ Interview with DH 2014.

⁹ Ibid.

experience ... and this attitude has trickled down into society.’¹⁰ This openness and fondness for the British could have also been inherited from his father who ‘speaks, reads and writes letter perfect English, is of modest stature, neat in appearance and extremely polite and courteous to visitors and guests. He is a devout Muslim, but not fanatical. Though completely Arab, the Sultan has great affection for Great Britain ... and listens to the BBC.’¹¹ The evidence for this influence is provided by Beasant, who described the family—Philip and Laura Roman—who looked after the Sultan before he went to Sandhurst:

*They had a curious brand of suburban, right-of-centre, white Anglo-Saxon values and prejudices so typical of those so beloved by much of England’s middle class. Laura Roman ran a Spartan domestic regime; Calvinistic in a way which reflected many of the spiritual and social values espoused by the Islamic faith. There was no television set in the Roman’s household, with both husband and wife frowning on the social excesses so frequently to be seen on the small screen. It was a routine kind of hospitality but one which the Sultan-in waiting never forgot.*¹²

This anecdote shows how personal relationships with the ruler can unwittingly impact on government policy for the future.

In an interview with a bishop, further evidence of the Sultan’s commitment to the Christian community emerged when the bishop recalled an encounter with the Sultan, who explained to the religious leaders present why he allowed churches in Oman:

*He told us about staying with a vicar in England where he created a prayer room for the young Sultan. The Sultan decided that if the vicar as a Christian leader would allow him space to pray—then I will return the favour and allow Christians to pray in my country.*¹³

The personality and whims of a monarch are something which cannot be measured or compared in sociological studies in the Gulf States, but clearly they have a huge impact on setting the tone for religious freedom.

¹⁰ Interview with PK 2014.

¹¹ Phillips, W. (1971) *Unknown Oman*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban.

¹² Beasant, J. (2013). *Oman: The True Life Drama and Intrigue of an Arab State*. Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing. Page 172.

¹³ Interview with BPH 2017.

A key document in which the Sultan sets the ethos of the nation is the Constitution of Oman, which among many other things addresses the nature of religious freedom for non-Muslim communities.

THE CONSTITUTION OF OMAN

The Omani constitution was ratified into law in 1996. The impetus for the late introduction of this Constitution seems to be derived from a near-fatal accident involving Sultan Qaboos in 1995.¹⁴ The subsequent fears and uncertainty over the future of Oman encouraged Sultan Qaboos to enshrine the values and identity of Oman and ensure its continuity by passing a constitution. In particular, there is a clause referring to a process which would ensure a smooth succession after Sultan Qaboos.

Embedded in the constitution is the apparent commitment to protecting religious freedom; Articles 28 and 29 in particular are relevant to the Christian community. The introduction to the Constitution and Articles 28 and 29 are as follows:

ROYAL DECREE NO. (101/96) Promulgating the Basic Statute of the State

We Qaboos bin Said, the Sultan of Oman

Confirming the principles that guided the policies of the State in various fields during the past era;

Resolving to continue our efforts for the development of a better future characterised by further achievements for the benefit of the Country and the Citizens;

Consolidating the international status that Oman enjoys and its role in establishing the foundations of peace, security, justice and cooperation among various states and people;

And in pursuance of the public interest;

Have decreed as follows:

Article (28) The freedom to practice religious rites according to recognised customs is protected, provided it does not violate the public order or contradict morals.

¹⁴Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Pages 173–174.

Article (29) The freedom of opinion and expression thereof through speech, writing and other means of expression is guaranteed within the limits of the Law.¹⁵

The inclusion of religious freedom in the constitution is carefully checked by the clause ‘provided it does not violate the public order or contradict morals’. The latter part is legal code referring to Islamic law as defined by the Ibadi school. This suggests that there is a clear boundary circumscribing religious freedom for Christians in Oman. Discerning this boundary, however, has been problematic for the author.

THE MINISTRY OF ENDOWMENT AND RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS (MERA)

The Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs was the first government organisation set up to oversee the religious concerns of Oman. As the number of non-Muslim expatriates increased along with the economy, the limitations of applying Islamic law and theology to the non-Muslim community became increasingly problematic. In response to this and the new constitution of 1996, a new ministry was created. They renamed the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. The Ministry of Justice became an organisation in its own right in 1997.

The primary role of the Ministry of Religious Affairs is to provide and oversee training for the imams and Islamic teachers in running the mosques. It also oversees the building and maintenance of mosques throughout the land.

Their goal is to have a policy of not approving more than one mosque within one and half kilometres of another in order to avoid competition. This is because alliances and friendships would be displayed through mosque membership and attendance. Men would sometimes switch mosques when there was a dispute, making a point of displaying their differences and arguments through their unwillingness to pray together.¹⁶

¹⁵ Taken from Walsh, P.N. (Ed.) (2013). *Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Muslim Majority Countries. A Comparative Analysis*. New York: Nova. Pages unnumbered.

¹⁶ Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Page 41.

Intriguingly, the MERA also oversees and approves the *wakil*, the legal agents who manage the water distribution of the village *falaj* system.¹⁷

AMERA AND THE CHURCH

In addition to this, the MERA also has the responsibility of monitoring and supervising the non-Muslim communities' religious requirements. Given that the school of Ibadi Islam has little to say about the Christian faith, the MERA chose to work closely with the non-Muslim communities who were recognised by royal decree. On the Christian front these included the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church of Oman (PCO). Until recently, the Orthodox churches were not recognised formally by the Omani government, so they were originally co-opted under the umbrella of the PCO. Today, however, the Orthodox churches relate directly to MERA in their own right.

The government oversight of the churches today comes under the mandate of the MERA. One of the new roles it took on was the wider responsibility of overseeing all the faith communities in Oman. So, the MERA oversees the activities of all the mosques, churches and Hindu temples in the country.

One of the ways in which the MERA exercises control over the faith communities is that anyone who has a teaching role in their community of faith is required to have a 'preacher's license'. This is unique to the Gulf. In practice, it is a straightforward process to get a preacher's visa and to date 'no one has heard of a preacher being denied a visa for the church'.¹⁸ This approach has been defended on the grounds that religious teaching is a profession, and like other professions there is a duty of care from the government to make sure that the public are being served by duly qualified practitioners. To guard against inappropriate preachers gaining access to the pulpit, the MERA avoids micromanaging matters of the Church by inviting the PCO to be an advisory body on who should be allowed visas. This can be quite a sensitive task, especially if a Christian group asks the Ministry for a visa for a new preacher because they have split from their original denomination in an acrimonious dispute. While the PCO is often anxious to prevent split groups as a matter of theological conviction that

¹⁷ Jones, J. & Ridout, N. (2012). *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Page 56.

¹⁸ Interview with DL 2014.

the unity of the Church should be paramount, the Ministry of Religious Affairs often chooses to issue the visa because they simply do not want to get drawn into intra-Christian disputes. The result of this reluctance to be drawn into the internal affairs of the Church is that Oman allows a greater religious freedom than even the Church itself.

For outside observers with a historical perspective, the role of the Church in Oman has shifted a long way from its roots in serving the Omani people through medical mission. There is a visible disconnect which sees the church congregations existing in cultural isolation from the Omani people, and this does not bode well for future Omani Christian-Muslim relations. The one bright light on the horizon is the growing profile of the Al Amana Centre, which continues to work discretely alongside with the Omani authorities in providing rich interfaith events in the form of intentional educational encounters. Through a variety of programmes offered to the local church and to visiting seminarians (religious leaders from the West), the Al Amana Centre seeks to bridge the cultural and religious worldviews between Christians and Muslims in close collaboration with the MERA.

One unfortunate side effect of the required collusion between the churches and MERA is that any unusual activities, or activities outside of services which are hosted by the church (e.g. a Christian concert or an event bringing in an outside speaker), would require permission from the authorities in writing. This has led to a degree of self-censorship and even competition between the churches to inform the government of activities hosted by each other. For example, at an interfaith event hosted in 2019 by the Gulf Churches Fellowship (with the full knowledge of the MERA), a Christian group reported the event to the authorities as an expression of their concern that this event may be unauthorised.

RESTRICTIONS

There are, however, restrictions upon the activities of the Christian Church. The first is a clear prohibition on evangelism towards Muslims. The second concerns the freedom to meet in visible groups in order to conduct religious teaching. For instance, hosting Bible study groups and fellowship groups (that are large and noisy) in someone's home is discouraged by the authorities. One reason for this is that it is easier to monitor religious activities if they are held in the officially sanctioned places of

worship. In another interview,¹⁹ it was stated that the law of Oman does allow for freedom of thought and religion, meaning that technically Omanis are free to follow any religion. Yet, for both Omanis and expatriates there is a caution about any public expression of their faith. Recently a small group of Omani citizens requested the use of a small worship hall, which caused some concern as to how welcome this would be by the Omani authorities. Members of the expatriate Christian community ‘expressed fear that the sight of Omani citizens entering church properties would result in legal action being taken against them’.²⁰

Interviews with a variety of Omanis²¹ have revealed a prevailing belief that to be Omani means to be Muslim, and more specifically to be Ibadi Muslim.

This means there is considerable pressure to conform and this has been described by observers as an impediment to true religious freedom. As one organisation reports, Omanis changing their faith face a number of challenges

[b]ecause leaving Islam for Christianity is seen as a betrayal of both family and tribe, converts from Islam to Christianity face pressure from family and society to recant their faith. In this Arabian Peninsula country, believers often face Christian persecution including being shunned by their families and expelled from their homes and jobs. They can also encounter problems over child custody and inheritance.²²

¹⁹ Interview with DH 2014.

²⁰ Interview with JM 2017.

²¹ It is worth noting that the Omanis who did speak with me on this topic were reluctant to have their identities revealed in any shape or form. This reluctance was dressed in the concern that ‘their answers maybe incorrect’ as opposed to a sense of possible state oppression.

²² <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/oman/> Accessed 28/04/2019.



CHAPTER 9

The Church Today and the Future of Interfaith

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN OMAN

When we look at the contemporary church in Oman, it is essentially split into two main groups by the Omani government: the Roman Catholic and the Protestant. Until recently, every other denomination has had to find a way to fit under these two umbrellas in order to have a presence in Oman. Two new additions that have been granted recognition and buildings by the government are the Greek Orthodox Church and the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church.

The Roman Catholic Church in Oman traces its origins to the Portuguese presence, but as late as 1975 did not have a resident chaplain and instead had a Capuchin father. Father Eugene Mattioli used to visit from Bahrain every two weeks to spend three to four days in Muscat and other centres.¹

The Church of St Peter and St Paul was consecrated on 4 November 1977 on land donated by Sultan Qaboos. The church's building project was completed by Father Maddi Barnaba of the Capuchin order, who had served faithfully as a priest in the region. Father Barnaba had experience building churches and congregations in Bahrain, Aden and Abu Dhabi before replacing Father Barth in Oman in 1974. Father Barth was the first Roman Catholic resident priest, and was an American (full name, Bartholomew

¹ Horner, N. (1978) "Present Day Christianity in the Gulf States of the Arabian Peninsula". *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*. No. 2. Page 59.

Kestell) in the Capuchin order. Prior to the church opening, Father Barth hosted and conducted services in a two-room house without electricity or water supply. Long-term Catholic residents in Oman recall celebrating mass at Bait al-Falaj under a makeshift canopy erected beside the home of the priest. The seating was crude and rustic and consisted of a dozen or so wooden logs. Father Barth was a rugged pioneering priest who traversed great distances across Oman in order to visit his dispersed congregations. He would regularly visit Sohar, Nizwa, Fahud, Rustaq and Salalah.² The role of priests today, however, is much more restricted, as they are advised by the authorities not to take masses in the interior.

In 1995, the Church of St Peter and St Paul was extended in order to accommodate up to 2000 worshippers at any one time. It was dedicated and blessed in its present form by Archbishop Jean Louis Tauran, the Vatican Secretary for Relations with States. This was an interstate event involving the invitation and participation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In 1987, in order to accommodate the growing numbers of Roman Catholic Christians, a new church, the Church of the Holy Spirit, was consecrated in Ghala. This came after the Bishop, His Lordship Bernard Gremoli, consulted with the local priest, Father Barnabas. The Bishop met with Sultan Qaboos and appealed for greater accommodation for the Roman Catholic Christians. The new church was completed in 1987 and included, as a symbol of continuity, a stone from the ruins of a sixteenth-century Franciscan monastery which was placed on the foundation.³ Qaboos, as well as gifting the land to the church, also donated a full pipe organ (the only one in Oman at that time). In addition to the church, the Holy Family Recreational Centre was constructed and included a basketball court, hall, classrooms and a grotto honouring 'Our Lady of Lourdes'.

Roman Catholics in Oman number around 55,000 (about 2% of the total population),⁴ with the membership largely derived from worshippers from the Indian subcontinent and the Philippines.

Today, there are four parishes with a total of seven priests. These consist of the Church of St Peter and St Paul in Ruwi, the Church of the Holy Spirit in Ghala, the Church of St Anthony of Padua in Sohar and the Church of St Francis Xavier in Salalah.

²<http://holyspiritchurchoman.com/aboutus.php> Accessed 17/08/2015.

³ Horner, N. (1978) "Present Day Christianity in the Gulf States of the Arabian Peninsula". *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*. No.2: 53–63.

⁴ Figures taken from the website of the church found at <http://holyspiritchurchoman.com/aboutus.php> Accessed 17/08/2015.

The Roman Catholic Church has a strong and positive relationship with the Omani government, which was evident in His Majesty's support for the community in the aftermath of the disastrous Cyclone Gonu, which struck the Sultanate on 6 June 2007, and the consequent floods which severely damaged the church building and its surroundings. The church, after its recovery, gave thanks to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said for his benevolence and support during and after Cyclone Gonu.

THE PROTESTANT CHURCH IN OMAN

The Protestant Church in Oman, which is constitutionally a shared ministry between the Anglicans and the Reformed Church in America, also hosts numerous congregations, which reflects the diversity of the Protestant Christian community. A leaflet I picked up on my visit to Oman towards the end of 2018 highlighted some of the larger groups who use the facilities.

These include the Mar Thoma Church, a church denomination that emerged in the nineteenth century through the work of Western missionaries in Kerala, who persuaded members of the Indian Syrian Jacobite Orthodox Church and the Mar Gregorius Church to place a greater emphasis on the centrality of scripture and evangelism. This led to the formation of the Mar Thoma Church, a curious blend of Orthodox liturgy and rituals punctuated with a protestant theology of the Bible and Mission. Mention is also made of the Arab Protestant congregation who are mainly drawn from Egypt and the Levant. The Church of South India (CSI) also gathers here and they use a liturgy similar to the Anglican tradition but in various Indian languages including Tamil and Malayalam.

The Brethren Church, a formal and conservative group, holds several meetings in various languages and are defined by their lay-led ecclesiology. In contrast, the Pentecostal tradition is well represented through the Bread of Life Fellowship, Oman Pentecostal Assembly and the (mainly Filipino) Oman Christian Fellowship, all of which emphasise contemporary worship and the exercising of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Reference is also made to the Evangelical groups, who place greater stress on Biblical exposition as the main feature of their worship and these include those of the Baptist tradition and the Full Gospel Church (which also meets in the Tamil language). The Presbyterians also gather here and notably one of their groups worships in Urdu, catering to the needs of the Pakistani Christian community.

The Indian community are by far the largest group of Christians who are visible in all the compounds and they represent the full diversity of India herself, worshipping in Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Malayalam and Kannada.

Then, finally, there is the Anglican congregation who, in partnership with the RCA, hosts an informal contemporary worship service along with a more traditional liturgical Eucharist.

There are four main sites of Christianity in Oman today and they are Ruwi, Ghala, Sohar and Salalah. Historically there used to be worship centres in old Muscat and Muttrah. The oldest place of worship is still being used in Muttrah to this day.

The Protestant Church of the Good Shepherd was dedicated in 1989.⁵ The name ‘Church of the Good Shepherd’ was chosen deliberately in order to minimise the gap between the local Muslim populations. The etched window shows hands bearing a sheep, rather than using a cross as a symbol. This was due to the influence of the Middle East priest-scholar Ken Bailey, explaining that the Good Shepherd rescuing the lost sheep was a symbol predating the cross in the imagery of the Christian Church.⁶

There is a third category of the worldwide Christian church which seems to be recognised more and more by the Omani government, and this is the Orthodox and Oriental Church. While on a recent visit to Oman at the beginning of 2019, I was privileged to witness the opening of the newest church in Muscat, the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church, which was built in an already crowded compound next to the Greek Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic compound.



Map showing church locations in Muscat

⁵ Skinner, R.F. (1992) *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press. Page 74.

⁶ From private correspondence with Ray Skinner 26/08/2015.

These are the sites which are permitted by the Omani government to be centres of worship for the Christian community as of 2019.

The map shows their locations in the country. The immediate conclusion one comes to is that all the churches are located near the coastline, in cities with a well-established port and maritime trading history.



Map marking the current location of churches in Oman

Attempts to plant churches in the interior of Oman, especially in places like Nizwa and Rustaq, have always been met with difficulty. There is a quiet and consistent narrative where Christians meeting in homes in Nizwa were persistently discouraged from doing so, with any perceived disobedience leading to law enforcement officials being called in.

Several times, for instance, the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) instructed the Protestant Church of Oman and the Roman Catholic Church that worship is only permitted in official places of worship on the coast. Even meeting in homes for Bible study groups was strongly discouraged by the Omani authorities. While several Christian groups have chosen to ignore this advice, it means that there is no visible or official presence of any church in the interior of Oman. This raises the following questions: Why are churches allowed on the coast but not in the interior? Does this imply that there are two forms of Ibadi Islam, in which one is more tolerant than the other, and that these are shaped by their geographical position?

HOW BIG IS THE CHURCH IN OMAN TODAY?

According to the Omani census figures released in 2016, the total population is around 4.5 million people, of which 2.1 million are expatriate worker residents. The Christian community constitutes 6.5% of the total population meaning that there are roughly around 300,000 Christians living in Oman today.

Statistics for the Church in Oman

<i>Denomination name</i>	<i>Year begun</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2015</i>
Anglican Church (D Cyprus & the Gulf)	1910	1100	5000	5600	6400	7300
Arab indigenous churches	1968	25	2400	2800	3300	3600
Brethren Assemblies	1960	100	350	410	490	500
Catholic Church (VA Arabia)	1508	470	52,300	63,000	73,900	96,000
Church of South India	1970	–	1000	1200	1500	1900
Coptic Orthodox Church	1970	1000	6200	6300	6500	6700
Filipino Christian Fellowship	1993	–	1300	1700	2300	3000
Mar Thoma Syrian Ch (D Behya Kerala)	1968	150	2000	2900	4300	4000
Muslim-background believers	1950	300	200	200	200	200
New Christian Fellowship	1993	–	500	600	730	800
Oman Christian Fellowship	1992	–	1200	1400	1700	2000
Orthodox Syrian Church of the East	1976	–	5400	5500	5700	5900
Pentecostal Fellowship	1990	–	800	1000	1300	1400
Protestant Church in Oman	1895	500	1000	1100	1200	1300
Revival Prayer Fellowship	1994	–	700	1000	1500	2000
St Thomas Evangelical Church	1975	–	710	990	1100	1400
Syriac Orthodox Church	1980	–	2200	2200	2200	2200
Unaffiliated Christians		5	5991	4003	5738	9018

Statistics courtesy of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at the Gordon Conwell Seminary 2014

The most reliable statistics for church attendance figures would appear to be those produced in the table. The figures are derived from a variety of sources including government census figures, interviews with church pastors, the US State Department's annual report on Religious Freedom and the comprehensive prayer guide called *Operation World*.⁷ The

⁷Johnstone, P. & Mandryk, J. (2001). *Operation World*. Franklin: Authentic Lifestyle Publishers.

resulting figures, when all is said and done, are still only estimates, but because of the multiple sources and the lack of any real hard data, these statistics must suffice.

The table clearly shows a significant growth in the number of members attending churches in Oman between 1970 and 2010. This is not growth through conversion, but rather, reflects the pattern of immigration. The year 1970 marks the ascension of Sultan Qaboos to the throne and signals a significant change in the history of Oman.

These figures also reflect the economic status of Oman. The discovery of oil triggered a spike in foreign workers entering into the country and many of these were Christians. Despite the obvious impact of the oil industry, there was a widely shared belief that it was a limited supply and this drove a rapid modernisation programme, thus necessitating still more foreign workers entering the country in order to facilitate the building of the new infrastructure.⁸ These figures do not reflect any trend of religious freedom as such, but rather show the trends in migration which are reflected in the worshipping church community.

One feature of Christianity in the Gulf is the clustering together of multiple churches and congregations into one area of the city. Unlike Western cities, where church buildings are seemingly scattered randomly throughout the landscape, the Middle East has a tradition of gathering distinctive communities into clearly defined geographical ‘quarters’. This applies to trade and commerce. One only needs to observe that often all the mobile phone vendors are gathered on one street, or that there is a gold souk where all the jewellers are clumped together, or we think of the Armenian or Greek quarters in Jerusalem or Damascus. Is this feature of Middle Eastern city landscapes simply passed on into the Gulf through Levantine Arab expatriate consultants, brought in to oversee the expanding urbanisation of Gulf States?

Why did Oman construct church compounds and insist that Christians were only allowed to worship there? Perhaps one reason is the practical advantage from a security point of view: by keeping the Christians all on one compound, both so that their safety can be easily catered for and so that it would be easier to monitor any undesirable behaviour that might emerge within the church. It is also not without advantage for the

⁸ McBrierty, V. & Al-Zubair, M. (2004). *Oman: Ancient Civilization: Modern Nation*. Dublin: Trinity College Press.

Christians to gather in one place. For the expatriates, the Church proved to be one of the main meeting grounds where they could meet, and not only worship together, but also socialise and share news.

THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

A former director of the Al Amana Centre recently published an article outlining some of the factors which have led Oman to a policy of interfaith engagement and inclusion.⁹ He concludes:

*Among the contributing factors are Oman's 4,500 year long history of maritime trade and international exposure, the sources of Islam, the Qur'an and sunna, the particular history, theology, exegetical approach and jurisprudence of Ibadhism, the leadership of Sultan Qaboos and his government, and the common law in Oman which sharia dovetails with modern corporate, civic and international law and leaves room for followers of other religions to practice their particular law. All of these factors work together to undergird the protection of peaceful inter-religious coexistence in Oman.*¹⁰

The same author points to the current climate of openness through the work of the Al Amana Centre. He says:

*Christians who work for the Al Amana Centre in Muscat are regularly invited to contribute to issues of leadership training for imams and constantly encouraged to have a public profile in promoting Christian presence in religious encounters. 'I find that when I am open about my faith I am respected more and trusted more than if I were to be discreet and diplomatic.'*¹¹

In conclusion he expressed his conviction that Oman was unique in the Gulf for creating a space for Christians under its legal framework, which itself is shaped by the ethos of Ibadi Islam which allowed Christians to have the

freedom to worship, or pray using their own liturgy, theology and practices. In other words, they are not under sharia law. This is because the Ibadi Muslim

⁹ Leonard, D.R. (2015) 'The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman'. *The Muslim World*. Vol 105, No. 2. pp. 266–278.

¹⁰ Ibid., page 278.

¹¹ Interview with DL 2014.

*community, shaped by their pragmatic trading experience have created a legal system which blends Shariá law with Civic and Corporate law and international maritime laws.*¹²

INTERFAITH ACTION IN OMAN

In a time of extreme religious violence, it must be noted that Oman foresaw the dangers of Islamism in the modern context decades ago. In 1971, ‘Sultan Qaboos used the word “terrorism” (irhab) to describe tribal insurrection ... and a decade later, he warned his countrymen of the danger that Islam could be for violence saying we should be aware of those who distort the teaching of our Muslim religion to serve their own political purposes’.¹³

Oman has seen dialogue as a key tool in countering extreme views and this has come to the fore in recent times. An example would be the Rapprochement and Human Harmony week held in 2014 in the Grand Mosque. The objective was to ‘ensure peaceful relations between cultures by developing cross cultural efforts encouraging mutual respect’.¹⁴

This commitment was manifest when the MERA presented an exhibition entitled Religious Tolerance: Islam in the Sultanate of Oman. This exhibition toured many destinations in Europe and was intended to show ‘the openness, tolerance and acceptance found in Oman, where freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution and the religious institutions of the Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics, Copts and other Christians are not only respected but also supported by the state’.¹⁵ This exhibition continues to travel around the world. Most recently it was held in the United Nations headquarters in New York City on 17 April 2019.

Oman is also notable for the ministry of the Al Amana Centre,¹⁶ which was originally a school set up by the Arabian Mission more than one hundred years ago and has now morphed into an interfaith project of the

¹² Ibid. DL interview.

¹³ Funsch, L.P. (2015) *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 186.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 187.

¹⁵ Popp, G. “Letter of Introduction” *Religious Tolerance: Islam in the Sultanate of Oman*, <http://www.islam-in-oman.com/en/organization/introduction-tolerance-oman/> cited in Funsch, L.P. (2015) *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 188.

¹⁶ <http://www.alamanacentre.org>.

Reformed Church in America. The centre promotes exchange visits between Omanis and Americans, as well as other nationalities. In 2018 and 2019, the Al Amana Centre hosted groups from Finland, Tanzania, Pakistan and Germany. The Al Amana Centre seeks to bring Christians and Muslims together in order to ‘promote good between religions with a strategy to disseminate knowledge of Islam through academic journals and by hosting scholars and delivering “Scriptural Reasoning”’.¹⁷ The Al Amana Centre is distinctive as it is the only Christian-led interfaith initiative in the Gulf Co-operative Council (GCC) region. Although Christian-led, it has a close working relationship with the MERA and is a valued partner in facilitating occasional interfaith projects initiated or sponsored by the local government.

The purpose of interfaith dialogue in Oman, according to Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Salami, the great-grandson of Nur al-Din al-Salami, is ‘to reflect on the foundations of our thinking, a common morality and a common sense of justice. For only when we are aware of these similarities can these form a basis for our actions, while accepting cultural differences, we and our children will enjoy a peaceful future’.¹⁸

Meanwhile the Omani Ministry of Religion has a post for an interfaith minister and they produce a magazine called *Al Tasamoh*, an Islamic Cultural journal which includes interfaith relations as part of its brief. One question arises from this: Why did Oman see the need to appoint an interfaith minister? Is this motivated and informed by purely theological concerns or are there other reasons?

Apart from a few domestic programmes in partnership with the Al Amana centre,¹⁹ the bulk of the interfaith work carried out by the MERA is outside of Oman. They were represented most recently at the US Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom held in Washington, DC, in June 2018.

¹⁷Ford, D.F. & Pecknold, C.C. (2006). *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Scriptural reasoning is the exercise of inviting people from another faith to read a selected piece of scripture and ‘feedback’ to the group what they see in the text. Without seeing the text through the prism of interpretation familiar to the other, new insights are gleaned from what the outsider sees.

¹⁸Quoted from Leonard, D.R. (2015) ‘The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman’. *The Muslim World*. Vol 105, No. 2. pp. 275–276.

¹⁹These include student and seminarian exchanges, particularly with the USA, scriptural reasoning classes and cultural immersion experiences. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

Omani involvement in local interfaith events is limited. The Al Amana Centre often hosts scriptural reasoning groups, and whilst there is huge interest from the Christian community to participate, Omani participation is often hit-and-miss with a very small number of individuals often finding themselves outnumbered by the Christian presence. This limited involvement from Omani citizens could be due to a lack of linguistic and theological expertise. Although the MERA is the official body appointed to oversee religious events, their involvement nonetheless requires approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A significant portion of the MERA's activity is devoted to intra-Islamic dialogue.²⁰ This fits in with the quietist approach to diplomacy which Oman is noted for.²¹ This work draws together Sunni and Shia and aims to find mutual agreement on issues such as 'the inclusion of non-Islamic communities, and responses of Islamic states to fundamentalist militancy'.²² This activity suggests then that the pressing need of the hour for the Omani government is not interfaith relations but intra-faith Islamic relations.

Today, the Omani government describes their commitment to pluralism as an outworking of their policy which they call al 'aish al mushtarak, which is the theological expression of Islamic tolerance.²³ It is a work in progress, and is evolving in response to global events. What is clear is that they have appointed leaders to develop this strand of the MERA's strategy and that this is part of their messaging and identity branding as an Islamic nation.

²⁰ Leonard, D.R. (2015) 'The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman'. *The Muslim World*. Vol 105, No. 2. p. 276.

²¹ Jones, J. & Ridout, N. (2012). *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

²² Leonard, D.R. (2015) 'The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman'. *The Muslim World*. Vol 105, No. 2. p. 276.

²³ Al-Salmi, A. 2016. *Religious Tolerance: A Vision*. Hildesheim, Germany: OLMS, p. 259.



Conclusion

This book examines the assumption that Ibadi theology is the distinctive influence which shapes the religious freedom of the church in Oman. The evidence is mixed. On the one hand there is support for this theory, as seen in the BBC radio show *Heart and Soul* broadcasted in 2015,¹ which suggested that Ibadi Islam has a history and theology that is predisposed to a tolerant Islamic society. The presence of a thriving Christian community and a well-established Hindu temple both point to an inclusive Islamic society. The author is not aware of other schools of Islam which would allow Muslims to pray in a church or synagogue in the absence of a mosque.²

Yet, there are boundaries. These pertain to the freedom to change one's religion, proselytising, the right to marry into other religious communities and to hold religious meetings outside of a designated place of worship. All these restrictions are consistent with practices in several other Islamic societies which subscribe to other schools of Islamic law. There does not seem to be anything which highlights a distinctly Ibadi approach other than the context of Oman.

In a report evaluating persecution of Christians in Oman, the Open Doors USA organisation concluded that religious freedom is a serious concern in Oman because

¹<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01wgccw>. Accessed 10 March 2017.

²See page 73 of this book.

public proselytizing is forbidden; evangelism is a private affair. Reportedly, some converts and expatriate Christians involved in proselytization were called in for questioning.

Oman has deported expatriate Christians, primarily because of their open witness, which Islamic law prohibits.

Legally distributing any religious literature requires permission from the Islamic authorities.

The government pays a salary to some Sunni imams (Muslim leaders) but not for religious leaders in the Shia sect or non-Muslim religions.

Non-Muslim religious groups must register with the government, which then approves and controls the leases of buildings.³

The problem with such reports from Christian non-governmental organisations is that they gloss over the bigger picture. The casual reader of such a report will conclude that Oman is an unpleasant context for the church and would not appreciate the reality that thousands of Christians worship every week without fear of persecution. The number of Christians who fall foul of the government for any perceived infringements of Omani law are miniscule. The number of Christians who are involved with the sometimes frustrating, arcane and opaque bureaucracy of government is again reduced to no more than thirty individuals. The vast majority of Christians worship in their facilities blissfully unaware of any difficulties. The other problem with such reports is that they highlight the negative encounters.⁴ As one interfaith director dryly commented, '[t]hey get more money if they tell stories of persecuted Christians'.⁵

Oman does not have religious freedom in the sense that anyone can believe or behave according to their individual conscience. The UN Charter of Human Rights and Religious Freedom would be rejected as a Western construct which stands on a platform of human reason rather than divine revelation. The latter clearly trumps the former. So, this points to theology as playing a vital role in determining the limits of religious freedom within an Islamic context.

³ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/oman/>
Accessed 09/03/2019.

⁴ This comment is not intended to diminish the very real suffering and persecution of Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere. Yet, such sources need to be read on the understanding that their agenda is fundraising for their organisation.

⁵ Interview. ARF (2018).

Interviews with Omani Islamic leaders stress their conviction that Ibadi Islam is the main source of all that informs their culture and practice. As one interviewee said, '[t]o be Omani is to be Muslim ... an Ibadi Muslim'.⁶ The theme then that emerges from interviews is that the religious climate in Oman is deeply influenced by Ibadi theology. However, given that my sample was small, and the subjects were all religious professionals employed by a government ministry, this may simply be a reiteration of the 'party line' to be presented to foreign enquirers like myself. Access and linguistic limitations meant that I was restricted in capturing the voice of a wider Omani demographic. There was reluctance in 'ordinary' Omani citizens to speak to me about the subject of religion, and any response they made was guarded. Whether this wary behaviour points to a lack of religious (and political?) freedom for *Omani* citizens is a matter for speculation. Or, it could simply point to a modest reluctance to speak of things where they feel they do not have expertise.

A NUANCED PICTURE

The evidence suggests a more nuanced picture of religious freedom in Oman. This study has shown that tolerance for the 'other' was clearly present on the coastal centres of maritime trade (and historical sources suggest this has been the case for more than a century), suggesting that this is the main reason that all the churches in Oman today are in seaport cities. So, it could be argued that the limited presence of the Church is more a product of mutual pragmatic economic interests rather than Islamic dictate.

The simple fact that there are no places of non-Muslim worship in the interior implies some validation of the view that there are two forms of Ibadi Islam—that of a moderate Ibadi Islam in Muscat contrasted with the more conservative and stricter expression of Ibadi Islam found in the interior. Does this simply indicate that the level of interaction between different populations is influencing an attitude of tolerance, with the port cities inevitably experiencing greater diversity of religions?

Then, does Ibadi theology have a major influence on the treatment of Christian communities in Oman?

⁶Interview. SNM (2015).

According to Khuri, the answer is no, not really. Instead he suggests:

The civil, legal and behavioural restriction that distinguish[es] Muslims and non-Muslims living in an Islamic state [is] only part of a wider and more comprehensive inequality that affects the relationship between strong and weak, dominant and dominated, irrespective of religious affiliation. What is thought to be a religious system is in fact also a social pattern. Field work⁷ has revealed that the dominant group imposes upon the dominated the very stratifications which the Muslims impose on non-Muslim dhimmis. The dominant Sunni tribes in Bahrain forbid the dominated Shi'a peasants from carrying arms, riding horses or being recruited into the army or police force. The same behaviour is seen in the Ibadis who impose upon Sunni Baluchis. Ibadis also do not allow the testimony of non-Ibadis to be accepted in their courts.⁸

TRIBAL CULTURE

It has also been suggested that Arabian tribal norms which predate Islamic culture are another influence. As Gaiser⁹ argued in his survey of the imamate, all the different expressions and states of the imamate can be found in pre-Islamic cultural and tribal precedents. One example of this is in the area of hospitality. The Ibadi scholar Nur al-Din, when writing about hospitality, advised and ruled that Christians can live in the same neighbourhood as Ibadi Muslims, and this is celebrated as an example of Ibadi Islam's largesse towards other faith communities. Gaiser argues that this may simply be a reflection of the famed hospitality ethic of the desert-dwelling Bedouin which predates Islam.¹⁰

One of the major challenges for this research was obtaining an Islamic perspective on the Christian presence in Oman. Among the first challenges I faced was a deep reluctance from those I interviewed in Oman to articulate their Islamic convictions. It became apparent that theology is clearly seen as the domain of the *ulama* (religious scholars) and that even those who are knowledgeable in Islam deferred to the scholars. Even among the scholars, the most common response I got when I asked for their opinion was their quoting of earlier commentators of the Qur'an. This vexing

⁷ Khuri, F.I. (1981). "Social Authority in the Tribal Structures of Arabia". *Al-Fikr al-Arabi*, Vol 22: 75–87.

⁸ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. Page 88.

⁹ Gaiser, A.R. (2010). *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers. The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibadi Imamate Traditions*. Oxford: OUP.

¹⁰ Ibid., page 143.

predicament was explained to me as a manifestation of the ingrained Omani ethos of modesty, combined with a genuine reverence and respect for their elders and scholars. This trait, which I found endearing and frustrating in equal measure, meant that my interviews only unearthed a fraction of the material I had hoped would enlighten this study.

Another sensitive area was the topic of Omani converts to Christianity. The official line presented to me by Omani Muslims was that there were or are no Omani Christians. When the author persisted to present some evidence to the contrary, (like the names of the worshippers in the Arabic language congregation meeting in the church in Muscat and Muttrah), there was evasion and denial. This seems to contradict the theological conviction that there is 'no compulsion in religion'. Unless there is a common understanding in the *tafsir* (Ibadi, Sunni or other) which delineates the limitations of 'compulsion in religion' (which would require trawling Arabic sources), this contradiction shows either the influence of theology or its absence.

CONCLUSION

This book has studied the nature of religious freedom in Oman and looked for a distinctive Ibadi approach to the issue of pluralism. The assumption was that Ibadi theology would have a unique approach which could inform us of principles that might be transferred elsewhere.

There is no dispute that the Church is present in Oman. It is large and flourishing and, on the surface, religious freedom is a lived reality. Dig deeper and we see that the religious freedom is prescribed by geographical limitations (churches only allowed on the coast). There is also a high level of bureaucratic control determining which pastors and priests are allowed residence and ministry visas, as well as other restrictions pertaining to marriage, proselytisation and conversion.

However, this limitation of religious freedom is not unique to Oman. We find similar environments across other countries in the Middle East and in other Muslim majority countries like Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. They vary in the matter of which government body is responsible for implementing these restrictions, but sharia law is consistent across the schools of Islam when it comes to the religious freedoms granted to Christian and Jewish communities.

The distinctiveness of Ibadi theology then lies in their understanding of the nature of the Qur'an, the role of the imam and a particular history which has created an Islamic culture which negotiates different political

contexts. For example, the imamate can stay hidden and emerge only when the political climate allows it. This theology has emerged in the context of tribal conflict, intra-Islamic rivalries, invasion by foreign powers and the waxing and waning of the Sultan and his empire.

This distinct Ibadi doctrine thus provides a religious narrative for the identity and culture of the Omani people, currently sustained and perpetuated by the personality cult of Sultan Qaboos. As such, the interviews with Omanis revealed their belief that Oman is distinct in its policy of religious freedom, which is unique to Ibadi Islam.

In practice, the variation of the experiences of the church reflects not so much an Islamic theological commitment to religious freedom, but rather a level of freedom to worship which the state grants the Christian community and other religious groups.

This level of freedom to worship seems to reflect the level of trust generated by the Christian community. This trust is generated through Christians serving the nation by initially providing medical care and education, and by introducing emerging technologies to the benefit of the local people. In Oman, the level of trust is also generated through a long history of trade—an industry which is largely based in the coastal regions, leaving the interior district largely insulated from the presence of foreigners.

When it comes to interfaith relationships and dialogue initiatives, the Al Amana Centre has been a valuable resource in facilitating positive encounters between Muslims and Christians. However, Oman shares some of the same flaws as interfaith initiatives elsewhere. Fahy and Bock¹¹ in their comparative study of interfaith events in Doha, New Delhi and London highlight eight failings. These include an emphasis on discussing global and general issues without reference to local contexts; glossing over differences between groups and always seeking the common ground; participation from the same limited pool of actors meaning that these events always end up ‘preaching to the converted’; dialogues focusing on an idealised form of religion and not addressing ‘lived out’ faith; religion being discussed in isolation from the wider political and social issues and ignoring the non-religious implications of pluralism; resistance to engaging in religious dialogue because there is no felt need, in the form of a crisis, that requires dialogue; interfaith initiatives being essentially about relationship

¹¹ Fahy, J. & Bock, J. (2017). *Beyond Dialogue? Interfaith Engagement in Delhi, Doha and London*. Cambridge: Woolf Institute.

building between the concerned parties and this needing to happen when there is no crisis; and finally, a lack of more creative models and activities of bringing people together and moving away from panels consisting of talking experts. Interfaith activities need to be accessible for grass-roots community engagement—especially for young people.

Similarly, the church in Oman itself is missing out on an opportunity to engage in and deepen interfaith encounters by not using the resources that the Al Amana Centre offers. At a time when media reportage of Islamophobia and persecution of Christians is frequent, the Christians and Muslims in Oman could be pioneering positive stories of coexistence and friendship which would be inspirational to the worldwide faith communities.

In conclusion, this study finds that the level of religious freedom experienced by the church in Oman is not influenced by a distinct outworking of Ibadi theology mediated through government mechanisms. Rather, the freedom to worship experienced by the Christian community and others is the result of economic forces and more pragmatic political concerns. Not least, there is a recognition by the Omani authorities that religious freedom is a mitigating factor in countering the effects of religious extremism.

In addition, the work of Grim¹² has shown that religious freedom also benefits the economy. The link between trade and religious freedom is worth exploring further in the Arabian context. It is clear to me that the Rentier State Theory is a model which can be applied to understanding the development of Christian-Muslim relations in Oman. At this point in time, only one study seems to touch on the application of Rentier State Theory to religious communities in the Arabian Gulf.¹³

Nevertheless, this study shows that there is, as yet, an untapped mine of Ibadi theology which needs to be brought into mainstream academia through more translation projects of sources which may shed light on the Ibadi understanding of the Christian community. If there is but one outcome of this book, it is to raise awareness that in Oman there is an Islamic society where Christians are free to worship and are indeed flourishing.

¹² Grim, J.B. (2010). *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*. (Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹³ Foley, S. (2010). *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

This means further study is merited in this area, perhaps along the line of McAuliffe's methodology. McAuliffe¹⁴ did an in-depth survey of *tafsir*¹⁵ about Qur'anic Christians. Taking just seven verses from the *suras* al-Baqarah, al-Imran, al-Ma'idah, al-Qasas and al-Hadid which speak of the *nasara* (a Qur'anic term used for Christians), she proceeded to review and analyse commentaries ranging from the first Islamic commentaries through the Middle Ages and on to modern and contemporary exegesis. Her approach seeks to gain an Islamic understanding of the topic by excluding Christian commentary. She writes that her approach

*brackets all previous conceptions of Christianity, or mentally erases all prior knowledge of the religious community known as Christians. The reader is then encouraged to approach the information offered by the Islamic commentators, as they address the Qur'anic verses under consideration.*¹⁶

Such an approach suggests that we look at some of the classical commentaries on these verses and then examine specifically Omani sources on the same *suras* in order to discover any authentic Ibadi distinctions.

Like in the McAuliffe study, five specific verses from the Qur'an could be the focus of this theological study.¹⁷ These verses include two which

¹⁴ McAuliffe, J.D. (1991) *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁵ Islamic Commentaries on the Qur'an.

¹⁶ Ibid., page 9.

¹⁷ The five verses chosen for this study:

Sura Al-Baqarah (2): 62

'Verily; those who believe and those who are Jews, Christians and Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.'

Sura Al-Ma'idah (5):82

'Verily, you will find the strongest men in enmity to the believers the Jews and you will find the nearest in love to the believers those who say "We are Christians" That is because amongst them are priests and monks and they are not proud.'

Sura Al-Ma'idah (5):48

'And we have sent down to you the Book confirming the scripture that came before it. So judge among them by what Allah has revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging away from the truth that has come to you. To each among you we have prescribed a law and a clear way. If Allah had willed, He would have made you one nation, but that he may test in you what He has given you: some compete in good deeds. The return of you all is to Allah; then He will inform you about that in which you used to differ.'

represent positive statements about the Christian community specifically. These two verses hint at a pluralist understanding of the world and seem to address the existence of other religions. The final verse contains a negative statement about Christians and Jews in particular.

The positive verses were taken from a selection of verses identified by McAuliffe¹⁸ in her authoritative study 'Qur'anic Christians', in which she focused on seven positive verses about Christians and the commentary of the classical *tafsir* regarding them.

The pluralist verses were chosen from a selection identified by Asrafuddin, Haleem and Hirji in three different studies.¹⁹

The final verse which condemns the Jews and Christians was listed by McAuliffe in her previously mentioned survey. We included a negative verse in order to see if theologians provided a context for this verse and affirmed the positive verses over the negative one.

The intention would be to see how Ibadi theologians dealt with the themes raised by these verses and how they were applied.

In order to further the possibility of hearing an authentic Ibadi voice, this study could be supplemented by interviewing (semi-structured interviews) state-sanctioned Islamic leaders who could be asked to expand on the practical applications of the authoritative texts which inform their expression of Islam. The one proviso, however, is that this study can only be, and must be, conducted in Arabic in order to access the full range of sources, both textual and human.

Sura Yunus (10):99

'And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed, all of them together. So will you then compel mankind, until they become believers.'

Sura Al-Taubah (9):30

And the Jews say, 'Uzair is the son of Allah and the Christians say Messiah is the son of Allah. That is their saying with their mouths, resembling the saying of those who disbelieved afore time. Allah's Curse be on them, how they are deluded away from the truth!'

¹⁸ McAuliffe, J.D. (1991) *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ Asrafuddin, A. (2009). "The Hermeneutics of Inter-faith Relations: Retrieving Moderation and Pluralism as Universal Principles in Qur'anic Exegeses". *Journal of Religious Ethics*. 37: 2. pp. 331–354. Haleem, M.A. (1999). *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style*. London: I.B. Tauris. Hirji, Z. (2010) *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam. Historical and Contemporary Discourse Amongst Muslims*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abdul Hamid el-Zein, (1977) Beyond Ideology and Theology: the Search for the Anthropology of Islam. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1):227-254.
- Alahmad, N. (2007). The Politics of Oil and State Survival in Iraq (1991–2003): Beyond the Rentier Thesis. *Constellations*, 14(4), 586–612.
- Albayrak, I., & al-Shueli, S. (2015). The Ibadi Approach to the Methodology of Qur’anic Exegesis. *Muslim World*, 105(2), 163–193.
- Alharthi, J. (2019). *Celestial Bodies* (M. Booth, Trans.). Dingwall, Scotland: Sandstone Press.
- Alkhater, K. R. (2012). The Rentier Predatory State Hypothesis: An Empirical Explanation of the Resource Curse. *Journal of Economic Development*, 37(4), 29–60.
- Allison, M. B. (1994). *Doctor Mary in Arabia*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Alston, R., & Laing, S. (2012). *Unshook Till the End of Time. A History of Relations Between Britain & Oman 1650–1970*. London: Gilgamesh Publishing.
- Al-Abed, I., & Hellyer, P. (Eds.). (2001). *The United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*. London: Trident Press.
- Al-Farsi, S. (2013). *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Al-Khalili, A. H. (2002). *The Overwhelming Truth: A Discussion of Some Key Concepts in Islamic Theology*. Muscat: Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.
- Al-Maarif. (1948). “Ál-Baghdadi.” *Al Farq bain al Fariq*, p. 277. Cairo, Egypt.
- Al-Maawali, M. S. S. (2016). *Articles on Ibadi Studies*. Oman: Self Published.
- Al-Nabhani, Y. (1901). *Hadha Kitab Irshad al-Hayan fi Tadbir al-Muslimin min Madaris al-Mubashshirin*. Beirut.

- Al-Nami, A. K. (2007). *Studies in Ibadhism*. London: Open Minds.
- Al-Qasimi, S. M. (1988). *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf*. London: Routledge.
- Al-Qassimi. (1996). *Omani-French Relations: 1715–1900* (B. R. Pridham, Trans.). Exeter: Forest Row.
- Al-Salimi, A., & Madelung, W. (2011). *Early Ibadi Literature: Abu l-Mundhir Bashir b. Muhammad b. Mahbub. Kitab al-Rasfi l-Tawhid, Kitab al-Muharaba and Sira*. Morgenlandes: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Al-Salimi, A. (2014). *Early Ibadi Theology: Six Kalam Texts by ‘Abd Allah b. Yazid al Fazrai*. Islamic History and Civilization Series Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.
- Al-Salmi, A. (2016). *Religious Tolerance: A Vision*. Hildesheim: Germany: OLMS.
- Al-Sayegh, F. (1996). American Missionaries in the UAE Region in the Twentieth Century. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32, 120–139.
- Al-Thani, H. (2014). An Archaeological Survey of Beth Qatraye. In M. Kozah, A. Abu-Husayn, S. Al-Murikhi, & H. Al Thani (Eds.), *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press.
- Al-Zoby, M. A., & Baskan, B. (Eds.). (2014). *State-Society Relations in the Arab Gulf States* (p. 142). Berlin: Gerlach Press.
- Anthony, J. D. (1975). *Arab States of the Lower Gulf: People, Politics, Petroleum*. Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute.
- Armerding, P. (2003). *Doctors for the Kingdom. The Work of the American Mission Hospitals in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. Michigan: Eerdmans.
- Arnold, T. W. (1965). *The Preaching of Islam*. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf.
- Asrafuddin, A. (2009). The Hermeneutics of Inter-faith Relations: Retrieving Moderation and Pluralism as Universal Principles in Qur’anic Exegeses. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 37(2), 331–354.
- Atiya, A. S. (2010). *History of Eastern Christianity*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press.
- Attwater, D. (1961). *The Christian Churches of the East. Vol II*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Azreki, R., & Ploeg, F. (2007). *Can the Natural Resource Curse Be Turned into a Blessing? The Role of Trade Policies and Institutions*. IMF Working Paper, 07/55. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund.
- Badger, G. P. (Trans.). (2010). *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman by Salil Ibn Razik*. Whitefish, MT: Reprint by Kessinger Publications.
- Baumer, C. (2006). *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*. London: I.B. Taurus.
- Beasant, J. (2013). *Oman: The True Life Drama and Intrigue of an Arab State*. Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing.
- Beasant, J., & Ling, C. (2004). *Sultan in Arabia: A Private Life*. Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing.
- Beblawi, H., & Luciani, G. (1990). *The Rentier State in the Arab World*. London: Routledge.

- Becker, C. H. (1924). *Islamstudien. Vom Werden und Wesen der islamischen Welt*. Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer.
- Bernard, V., & Salles, J. F. (1991). Discovery of a Christian Church at Al-Qusur, Failaka (Kuwait). *Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 21, 7–21.
- Betts, R. B. (1975). *Christians in the Arab East*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.
- Bin Talal, H. (1998). *Christianity in the Arab World*. London: Arabesque Intl.
- Bird, C. (2010). *The Sultan's Shadow. One Family's Rule at the Crossroads of East and West*. New York: Random House.
- Birks, H. (1895). *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Valpy French. Vol. 2*. London: John Murray.
- Blakeney, R. (1841). *Journal of an Oriental Voyage*. London: R. Edwards.
- Boersma, J. (1991). *Grace in the Gulf*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Bosch, D. (1989). *Seashells of Southern Arabia*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing.
- Bosch, D. (1982). *Seashells of Oman*. London: Longman Group.
- Bosch, D. T. (2001). *The American Mission Hospitals in Oman. 1893–1974. 81 Years*. Muttrah, Oman: Mazoon Press.
- Bowman, J. (1973). The Sasanian Church in the Kharg Island. *Acta Iranica*, 1, 217–220.
- Brock, S. P. (2000). Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye. *ARAM*, 11/12, 85–96.
- Brown, J. (2012). *Mainly Uphill. A Bishop's Journey*. Sleaford, UK: Clearprint.
- Brown, J. (2014). The Essentials of Ibadi. Book Review. *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, VII(3), 353–355.
- Buckley, D. T., & Mantilla, L. F. (2013). God and Governance: Development, State Capacity, and the Regulation of Religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52(2), 328–348.
- Calverley, E. T. (1958). *My Arabian Days and Nights*. New York: Thomas. Y. Crowell Company.
- Carter, J. R. L. (1982). *Tribes in Oman*. London: Peninsular Publishing.
- Carter, R. A. (2008). Christianity in the Gulf During the First Centuries of Islam. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 19, 71–108.
- Cawston, A., & Curtis, M. (2010). *Arabian Days: Memoirs of Two Trucial Oman Scouts*. London: Michael Curtis Publishers.
- Chisholm, A. H. T. (1975). *The First Kuwait Oil Concession Agreement: A Record of Negotiations 1911–1934*. London: Frank Cass.
- Clarke, A. (1993). *Through the Changing Scenes of Life. 1893–1993*. Bahrain: American Mission Hospital.
- Cockcroft, D., Frank, A. G., & Johnson, D. L. (1972). The Development of Underdevelopment. In *Dependence and Underdevelopment: Latin America's Political Economy*. Garden City: Anchor Books.
- Colless, B. (Trans.). (2008). *The Wisdom of the Pearlers. An Anthology of Syriac Christian Mysticism*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publishers.
- Commings, D. (2012). *The Gulf States: A Modern History*. London: I.B. Tauris.

- Cragg, K. (1991). *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*. Westminster: John Knox Press.
- Cragg, K. (1997). *Tafsir and Istifar in the Qur'an. Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 8(3), 309–322.
- Crone, P., & Zimmermann, F. (2001). *The Epistle of Salim ibn Dhakwan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, J. (1995). *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Custers, M. H. (2006). *Ibadi Publishing Activities in the East and the West. C. 1880–1960s*. Maastricht: Published by author.
- Custers, M. H. (2008). *Al-Ibadiya. A Bibliography. Volume 1. Ibadis of the Mashriq*. Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.
- Dafarty, F. (1990). “The Carmatians”. *Encyclopaedia Iranica* Vol IV. 823–832. London & New York: Ehsan Yarshater.
- Damania, R., & Bulte, E. (2008). Resources for Sale: Corruption, Democracy and the Natural Resource Curse. *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis and Policy*, 8(10), 1890–1895.
- Davidson, C. M. (Ed.). (2011). *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Davidson, C. M. (2012). *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Dresch, P. (2006). Foreign Matter: The Place of Strangers in Gulf Society. Found in Fox, J. W. et al. (2006). *Globalization in the Gulf*. London: Routledge.
- Dresch, P., & Piscatori, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Monarchies and Nations. Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Doumato, E. A. (2000). *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dupret, B., et al. (2012). *Ethnographies of Islam: Ritual Performances and Everyday Practices*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Dyck, G. (1995). *The Oasis. Al Ain Memoirs of 'Dr Latifa*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing.
- ECSSR. (2010). *Energy Security in the Gulf. Challenges and Prospects*. Abu Dhabi: Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research.
- Eickelman, C. (1984). *Women and Community in Oman*. New York: New York University Press.
- Eickelman, D. (1983). Omani Village: The Meaning of Oil. In J. E. Peterson (Ed.), *The Politics of Middle Eastern Oil*. Washington, DC: Middle East Institute.
- El-Zein, A. H. (1977). Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 6, 227–254.
- Endress, G. (2002). *Islam: An Historical Introduction. Second Edition*. Edinburgh: The New Edinburgh Islamic Surveys. Edinburgh University Press.

- Ennami, A. K. (2008). *Studies in Ibadhism*. Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.
- Esposito, J. L., Voll, J. O., & Bakar, O. (2008). *Asian Islam in the 21st Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1949). *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fahy, J. (2018). *The International Politics of Tolerance in the Persian Gulf*, 46 (4). Taylor & Francis Online. Retrieved March 19, 2019, from <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/cAmc6XKsIest5CVJfZus/full>.
- Fahy, J., & Bock, J. (2016). *Beyond Dialogue? Interfaith Engagement in Delhi, Doha and London*. Cambridge: Woolf Institute.
- Fares, S. (2011). Christian Monasticism on the Eve of Islam: Kilwa (Saudi Arabia) – New Evidence. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 22, 243–252.
- Feldman, N. (2003). *After Jihad: America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Fiey, J. M. (1969). Iso' yaw le grand. Vie du catholicos nestorien Iso' yaw III d'Adiabene. *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 35, 305–333.
- Fiey, J. M. (1993). *Pour un Oriens Christianus Novus*. Beirut: Texte und Studien 49. Stuttgart: Steiner.
- Flick, U. (1998). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Floor, W. (2015). *Muscat: City, Society and Trade*. Washington, DC: Mage Publications.
- Foley, S. (2010). *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Ford, D. F., & Pecknold, C. C. (2006). *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Fox, J. W., et al. (2006). *Globalization in the Gulf*. London: Routledge.
- Francesca, E. (2014). *Ibadi Theology: Rereading Sources and Scholarly Works*. Hildesheim, Zurich, & New York: Olms-Weidmann.
- Funsch, L. P. (2015). *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gabriel, T. (1996). *Christian-Muslim Relations in Sarawak, East Malaysia*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing House.
- Gabriel, T. (2007). *Christian Citizens in an Islamic State. The Pakistan Experience*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Gaiser, A. R. (2010). *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers. The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibadi Imamate Traditions*. Oxford: OUP.
- Gause, F. G. I. I. I. (1994). *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press.

- Geaves, R. (1996). *Sectarian Influences Within Islam in Britain; With References to the Concepts of 'Ummah' and 'Community'*. Leeds: Monograph Series in Community and Religion.
- Geertz, C. (1968). *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gellner, E. (1981). *Muslim Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ghazal, A. (2015). Omani Fatwas and Zanzibari Cosmopolitanism: Modernity and Religious Authority in the Indian Ocean. *Muslim World*, 105(2), 236–250.
- Glubb, J. B. (1969). *A Short History of the Arab Peoples*. London: Stein & Day.
- Goddard, H. (2000). *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Chicago: New Amsterdam Books.
- Gotting, F. (2006). *Healing Hands of Qatar*. Qatar: Self Published.
- Graham, H. (1978). *Arabian Time Machine: Self Portrait of an Oil State*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Gray, M. (2011). *A Theory of Late Rentierism in the Arab States of the Gulf*. Georgetown University Centre for International and Regional Studies Occasional Papers, No. 7. Doha, Qatar: Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service.
- Green, N. (2014). *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Griffith, S. H. (2008). *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Grim, J. B. (2010). *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Groiss, A. (Trans.). (2003). *The West, Christians and Jews in Saudi Arabian Schoolbooks*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Gropp, G. (1991). Christian Maritime Trade of Sasanian Age in the Persian Gulf. In K. Schippman, A. Herling, & J. F. Salles (Eds.), *Golf-Archäologie*. Buch am Erlbach.
- Haig, C. A. (1902). *Memories of the Life of General F. T. Haig*. London: Marshall Brothers.
- Haleem, M. A. (1999). *Understanding the Qurán: Themes and Style*. London: I.B. Taurus.
- Harrison, P. (1940). *Doctor in Arabia*. New York: John Day Company.
- Harrison, T. S. (2008). Memories of an American Missionary Family in the Persian Gulf. *The Joint Archives Quarterly*, 18(3), 1–10.
- Hawley, D. (1970). *The Trucial States*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Hawley, D. (1989). *Oman and Its Renaissance*. London: Stacey International.
- Healey, J. F. (2000). The Christians of Qatar. Found in Netton, I. R. (2000). *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth. Vol 1*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.

- Heard-Bey, F. (2004). *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing.
- Hellyer, P. (1998). *Waves of Time: The Marine Heritage of the United Arab Emirates*. London: Trident Press. Page 67.
- Hellyer, P. (2001). Nestorian Christianity in the Pre-Islamic UAE and Southeastern Arabia. *Journal of Social Affairs*, 188(72), 79–99.
- Herb, M. (1999). *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Hertog, S. (2010). *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and State in Saudi Arabia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hirji, Z. (2010). *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam*. In *Historical and Contemporary Discourse Amongst Muslims*. London: I.B. Taurus Publishers.
- Hoffman, V. J. (2012). *The Essentials of Ibadi Islam*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Holy, L. (1991). *Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society. The Berti of Sudan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Horner, N. (1978). Present Day Christianity in the Gulf States of the Arabian Peninsula. *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 2(2), 53–63.
- Hunter, E. C. D. (Ed.). (2009). *The Christian Heritage of Iraq: Collected Papers from the Christianity of Iraq I-V Seminar Days*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press.
- Husain, S. A. (2003, June 7). Modernism, Secularism and Islam: A Discourse on Mutuality and Compatibility. *The New Age. Dhaka Daily*, Bangladesh.
- Ibn Annas, M. (Trans. Bewley, A.). (2014). *Al-Muwatta of Imam Malik*. Norwich: Diwan Press.
- Ibn Khaldun. (Ed.). Dawood N.J. (Trans.) Rosenthal, F. (2015). *Al Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Innes, N. M. (1987). *Minister in Oman*. Cambridge: Oleander Press Ltd.
- Ismael, J. S. (1993). *Kuwait: Dependency and Class in a Rentier State*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Jenkins, P. (2008). *The Lost History of Christianity*. Oxford: Lion Books.
- Johnstone, P., & Mandryk, J. (2001). *Operation World*. Franklin: Authentic Lifestyle Publishers.
- Jones, J., & Ridout, N. (2012). *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kamrava, M. (2012a). *Migrant Labour in the Persian Gulf*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Kamrava, M. (2012b). *The Political Economy of the Persian Gulf*. London: Hurst & Co Publisher Ltd.
- Kamrava, M. (2013). *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Kanna, A. (2010). Flexible Citizenship in Dubai: Neoliberal Subjectivity in the Emerging “City Corporation”. *Cultural Anthropology*, 25(1), 100–129.

- Kapiszewski, A. (2001). *Nationals and Expatriates: Population and Labour Dilemmas of the Gulf*. Dryden, NY: Ithaca Press.
- Keay, F. E. (1951). *History of the Syrian Church in India*. Delhi: ISPCK.
- Kenkow, I. (1947). The Annual Fairs of the Pagan Arabs. *Islamic Culture*, 21, 111–113.
- Khasan, H. (2016a). Christianity's Claim to the Birthplace of Islam. *Stratfor Journal*, April 23.
- Khasan, H. (2016b). Religious Intolerance in the Gulf States. *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2016 Edition. Retrieved September 15, 2016, from <http://www.meforum.org/6044/religious-intolerance-in-the-gulf-states>.
- Khuri, F. I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books.
- Khuri, F. I. (1981). Social Authority in the Tribal Structures of Arabia. *Al-Fikr al-Arabi*, 22, 75–87.
- King, G. R. D. (1997). A Nestorian Monastic Settlement on the Island of Sir Bani Yas, Abu Dhabi. A Preliminary Report. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 60(Part 2), 221–235.
- King, G. R. D. (2001). The Coming of Islam and the Islamic Period in the UAE. In I. Al-Abed & P. Hellyer (Eds.), *The United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*. London: Trident Press.
- Kozah, M., Abu-Husayn, A., Al-Murikhi, S., & Al Thani, H. (2014). *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press.
- Kung, H., & Ka Ng, H. (1991). *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*. London: SCM.
- Kuriakose, M. K. (1982). *History of Christianity in India: Source Materials*. Madras: CLS.
- Landen, R. G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Langfeldt, J. A. (1994). Recently Discovered Early Christian Monuments in North-Eastern Arabia. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 5, 32–60.
- Leonard, D. R. (2015). The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman. *The Muslim World*, 105(2), 266–278.
- Lewis, B. (1970). *Islam and the West*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, B., & Schnapper, D. (1994). *Muslims in Europe*. London: Pinter Publishers.
- Lewis, P. (1994). *Islamic Britain*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Libert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Long, D. E., & Koch, C. (1997). *Gulf Security in the Twenty-First Century*. Abu Dhabi: Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research.
- Longva, A. N. (1999). *Walls Built on Sands: Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

- Loosley, E. (2002). *A Historical Overview of the Arabian Gulf in the Late Pre-Islamic Period: The Evidence for Christianity in the Gulf*. Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey.
- Lorimer, J. G. (1915). *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia* (Vol. 4). Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing.
- Luciani, G. (1990). *The Arab State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Madelung, W. (1998). *An Ismaili Heresiography*. Leiden: Brill.
- Mahdavy, H. (1970). The Patterns and Problems in Economic Rentier States: The Case of Iran. Found in Cook, M. A. *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mahjoub, N. (2008). The Qarmatians. Retrieved July 18, 2016, from <http://middleeastpanorama.blogspot.ac/2014/03/the-qarmatians-al-qaramita.html>.
- Mann, M. (1994). *Trucial Oman Scouts: Story of a Bedouin Force*. London: Michael Russell Publishing Ltd.
- Mason, A. D., & Barny, F. J. (1926). *History of the Arabian Mission*. New York: RCA.
- Matthiesen, T. (2013). *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn't*. Stanford: Stanford Briefs.
- McAuliffe, J. D. (1991). *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McBirnie, W. S. (1973). *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.
- McBrierty, V., & Al-Zubair, M. (2004). *Oman: Ancient Civilization: Modern Nation*. Dublin: Trinity College Press.
- McLaughlin, R. (2010). *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Meillassoux, C. (1972). From Reproduction to Production. *Economy and Society*, 1(1), 102–103.
- Mingana, A. (1926). *The Early Spread of Christianity to India*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Moffett, S. H. (2009). *A History of Christianity in Asia. Vol 1*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Morris, J. (1957). *Sultan in Oman*. London: Eland.
- Mouline, N. (2014). *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Mu'ammār, A. Y. (2007). *Ibadism in History: Volume I: The Emergence of the Ibadi School*. Muscat: Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.
- Nasir, J. J. (1986). *The Islamic Law of Personal Status*. London: Graham Trotman.
- Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling. (1988). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood.
- Netland, H. (2001). *Encountering Religious Pluralism*. Leicester: Apollos.
- Netton, I. R. (1986). *Arabia and the Gulf: From Traditional Society to Modern States*. London: Croom Helm.

- Netton, I. R. (2000). *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth* (Vol. 1). Leiden: Leiden University Press.
- Nielsen, J. (1995). *Muslims in Western Europe* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- O'Leary, D. L. (2000). *Arabia Before Muhammad*. London: Routledge.
- Owen, W. F. (1833). *Voyages to Explore the Shores of Arabia, Africa and Madagascar*. London: R. Bentley.
- Parry, K. (Ed.). (2010). *Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Payne, R. (2011). Monks, Dinars, and Date Palms: Hagiographical Production and the Expansion of Monastic Institutions in the Early Islamic Persian Gulf. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 22, 97–111.
- Peters, F. E. (2003). *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conflict and Competition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Phillips, W. (1967). *Oman: A History*. London: Longmans.
- Phillips, W. (1971). *Unknown Oman*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban.
- Picucci, E. (2004). *The Apostolic Vicariate of Arabia*. Rome: Vatican.
- Potter, L. G. (Ed.). (2013). *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Potts, D. T. (1983). *Dilmun. New Studies in the Archaeology and Early History of Bahrain*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.
- Potts, D. T. (1990). *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity: Volume II: From Alexander the Great to the Coming of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Potts, D., Al Naboodah, H., & Hellyer, P. (Eds.). (2003). *Archaeology in the United Arab Emirates*. London: Trident Press.
- Prawer, J., & Ben-Shammai, H. (1996). *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period (638–1099)*. New York: New York University Press.
- Razik, S. (1871). *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman*. (G. P. Badger, Trans., 1986). London: Darf Publishers.
- Ross, M. (2008). Oil, Islam and Women. *American Political Science Review*, 102(1), 107–123.
- Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Sanmiguel, M. V. (1970). *Christians in Kuwait*. Kuwait: Bishop's House.
- Scudder, R. L. (1998). *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Searle, P. (1975). *Dawn Over Oman*. Beirut: Khayat Publishing.
- Seck, M. (2012). *Narratives as Muslim Practice in Senegal*. New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.
- Sharabi, H. (1992). *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sirhan, I.S. (Trans. Ross, E. C.) (1984). *Annals of Oman*. Cambridge: The Oleander Press.

- Skeet, I. (1974). *Muscat and Oman: The End of an Era*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Skeet, I. (1992). *Oman: Politics and Development*. London: Macmillan.
- Skinner, R. F. (1992). *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press.
- Smith, G. R., et al. (1997). *New Arabian Studies*. Vol 4. Exeter: Exeter University Press.
- Smith, G. R., et al. (2004). *New Arabian Studies*. Vol 6. Exeter: Exeter University Press.
- Stephens, H. M. (1897). *Albuquerque: The Early Portuguese Settlement in India*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.
- Talbot, E. (2009). *Desert Blooms: A History of the Catholic Church of Qatar*. Unpublished Manuscript.
- Tarzi, S. M., & Schackow, N. (2012). Oil and Political Freedom in Third World Petro States: Do Oil Prices and Dependence on Petroleum Exports Foster Authoritarianism. *Journal of Third World Studies*, XXIX(2), 231–250.
- Tejiran, E. H., & Simon, R. S. (2012). *Conflict, Conquest and Conversion: Two Thousand Years of Christian Missions in the Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Thackston, W. M. (1986). *Naser E. Khusrow. Book of Travels. Persian Heritage Series*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Thesiger, W. (2007, Centenary Edition). *Arabian Sands*. Dubai: Motivate Publishers.
- Thomas, D. (1992). *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, A. (2010). *The Christian Church in Kuwait: Religious Freedom in the Gulf*. Kuwait: Saeed & Samir.
- Thompson, A. (2011). *Christianity in the UAE: Culture and Heritage*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing.
- Thompson, A. (2014). *Jesus of Arabia*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing.
- Trimingham, J. S. (1990). *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban.
- Ulrichsen, K. C. (2011). *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Valeri, M. (2017). *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State* (Revised ed.). London: Hurst & Company.
- Vander Werf, L. L. (1934). *Christian Mission to Muslims*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.
- Van Gorder, A. C. (2010). *Christianity in Persia and the Status of Non-Muslims in Iran*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Vine, A. (1937). *The Nestorian Churches*. London: Independent Press.
- Von Denffer, A. (1983). *‘Ulum Al-Qur’an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’an*. Leicester: Islamic Foundation.

- Von Grunebaum, G. E. (1970). *Classical Islam. A History, 600–1258*. London: Barnes & Noble.
- Walsh, P. N. (Ed.). (2013). *Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Muslim Majority Countries. A Comparative Analysis*. New York: Nova.
- Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd.
- Watt, W. M. (1983). *Islam and Christianity Today: A Contribution to Dialogue*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Weber, M. (1930). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge.
- Wellsted, J. R. (1840). *Travels to the City of Caliphs, Along the Shores of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean*. London: Colborn.
- Wilkinson, J. C. (1979). The Origins of the Omani State. In D. Hopwood (Ed.), *Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics* (pp. 76–83). London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Wilkinson, J. C. (1987). *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Wilkinson, J. C. (2010). *Ibadism: Origins and Early Development in Oman*. Oxford: OUP.
- Wilkinson, J. C. (2015). On Being an Ibadi. *Muslim World*, 105, 142–156.
- Winkler, D. W. (2007). *Syriac Churches Encountering Islam. Past Experiences and Future Perspectives*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press.
- Woodberry, R. D. (2004). *The Shadow of Empire: Christian Missions, Colonial Policy and Democracy in Post-Colonial Societies*. Unpublished Thesis, University of North Carolina.
- Woodberry, R. D. (2006). Reclaiming the M-Word: The Legacy of Missions in Non-Western Societies. *Review of Faith and Internal Affairs*, 4(1), 3–12.
- Wright, T. (1855). *Early Christianity in Arabia: A Historical Essay*. London: Bernard Quaritch.
- Ye'or, B. (1996). *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Ye'or, B. (2013). *Understanding Dhimmitude*. New York: RVP Press.
- Yom, S. L. (2011). Oil, Coalitions, and Regime Durability: The Origins and Persistence of Popular Rentierism in Kuwait. *St Comp International Development*, 26, 217–241.
- Zwemer, S. (1900). *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam*. Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier.
- Zwemer, S., & Cantine, J. (1938). *The Golden Milestone: Reminiscences of Pioneer Days Fifty Years Ago in Arabia*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company.

INDEX¹

A

Abdisho, 29
Abdul Hamid El-Zein, 19
Abu Dhabi, 3, 7n6, 7n7, 13n4, 13n7,
28, 29, 29n8, 30n12, 34n25,
39n44, 39n45, 40n50, 46n68,
133, 145
Abu Said, 46
Academia, 3, 98, 163
Al Ain, 9, 9n17
Akkaz, 28
Anglican, 3, 4, 24, 24n58,
83, 100, 137, 138,
147, 148
Anthropological, 18, 19, 123
Archaeologists, 7
Arnold, T.W., 17, 17n30
Asceticism, 16
Assyrian, 7, 7n5, 28n6, 43n57
Australia, 11
Authoritarian, 25

B

Bahrain, 4, 7, 8, 8n13, 11, 11n2, 29,
31, 32, 35n28, 38, 40, 41, 43,
47, 48, 99, 108, 127, 145, 160
Baluchi, 1
Basra, Iraq, 8, 122
Becker, C.H., 17, 17n26
Beth Mazunaye, 7
Beth Qatraye, 7, 34n24, 34n26, 42n56
Betts, R.B., 6n3, 15, 15n16
Britain, 11, 19n38, 24n59, 64, 91, 92,
102, 103, 105n30, 139
Al Bu Said, 59–61

C

Cacophonic, 3
Cantine, James, 60, 98, 100, 102,
102n19, 105–107, 106n34, 113,
119n78, 119n80
Capitalism, 16

¹ Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.

Characterised, 140
Chronicle of Arbela, 7, 29
Chronicle of Seert, 7, 29
 Colonialism, 8, 9n18, 74
 Conceptualising, 5
 Conscience, 40, 158
 Contemporary, 2, 15, 25, 27, 72, 73,
 87, 97, 147, 148, 164
 Covenant of Umar, 12
 Cragg, K., 15, 15n14
 Creed, 2, 38, 43, 45, 111
 Cultural, 1, 10n18, 16, 19–21, 24, 25,
 37, 38, 45, 50, 60, 93, 128, 129,
 132, 133, 143, 153, 154, 160
 Custers, 24

D

Dearth, 3
 Denominations, 3, 137
Dhimmitude, 12, 44, 45
 Dialogue, 76, 127, 133, 153–155, 162
Al difa, 23
 Discalced Carmelite, 8
 Discrete, 6, 126, 152
 Disparity, 4, 66
 Distinctive, 2, 18, 53, 70, 71, 78, 80,
 81, 151, 154, 157, 161
 Diversity, 1, 127, 147, 148, 159
 Dutch, 8, 91, 136n3

E

Egypt, 3, 9n18, 11, 15, 41, 47,
 48n75, 147
 Eickelman, D., 18, 18n33
Emirs, 22, 22n52, 39n43, 56, 61, 62,
 65, 66, 82, 84, 93n25, 130n35,
 160n8
 Encampments, 1
 Ethiopia, 3
 Ethos, 16, 18, 47, 64, 81, 140,
 152, 161

European, 8, 61, 75, 102
 Evans-Pritchard, E.E., 20, 20n48

F

Failaka, 28, 28n5
 Foundation, 31, 89, 136n3, 146
 Frontiers, 38, 117

G

Gabriel, T., 14, 14n11, 34
 Gaiser, A.R., 23, 24n57, 73,
 160, 160n9
 Geertz, C., 17
 Gellner, E., 20
 Goddard, H., 15, 15n18, 38, 38n40
 Griffith, S.H., 15, 15n13, 15n15
 Gulf Arabs, 4, 8, 9n18, 88

H

Hanafi, 1, 70
 Hanbali, 1
 Hedonistic, 16
 Hellyer, Peter, 29, 30
 Herb, M., 21, 21n49, 37n39, 60,
 137, 137n7
 Heritage, 1, 131
 Horner, N., 14, 14n9, 145n1, 146n3
 Hostile, 1, 11, 17, 58, 74, 79, 113
 Hume, David, 20
 Husain, S.A., 16, 16n21
 Hygiene, 1

I

Ibadis, 2, 4, 10, 22–25, 23n55,
 24n57, 24n61, 36, 50, 53–84,
 86–88, 90, 93, 95, 99, 114, 123,
 131, 138, 141, 142, 144, 149,
 152, 157, 159–165, 160n9
 Ibn Khaldun, 20, 20n47, 130

Imagery, 90, 148
 Imamate, 23n56, 24, 24n57, 53,
 57–59, 62–68, 73–75, 81, 82, 86,
 160n9, 162
Imams, 22, 22n52, 23n54, 36n34,
 39n43, 56, 58, 61, 62, 66, 68,
 84, 93n25, 96, 130n35, 141,
 152, 158, 160n8
 Indonesia, 17, 17n32, 18, 19n41,
 91, 161
 Infrastructures, 6
 Interfaith, 11, 153–155, 162,
 162n11, 163
 Interpret, 1, 5
 Interpretation, 4, 64, 72, 99, 154n17
 Intrinsically, 2
 Investigation, 15
 Iraq, 6, 8, 11, 32n19, 38, 43, 47, 49,
 55, 56, 81, 99, 129
 Islam, 1, 2, 4–6, 7n6, 9n15, 12, 12n3,
 14, 14n10, 15n19, 16–19,
 16n21, 17n24, 17n27, 17n29,
 17n30, 17n31, 17n32, 19n36,
 19n38, 19n39, 19n41, 19n42,
 19n43, 19n44, 22–25, 22n52,
 22n53, 27, 28, 28n2, 28n7,
 30n14, 32n21, 35n27, 36,
 37n39, 39n43, 40n47, 41,
 43–46, 48–50, 49n79, 50n81,
 53–59, 61, 62, 64–68, 71–86, 92,
 93n25, 96–99, 96n3, 100n14,
 101, 112–114, 125, 127–129,
 138, 142, 144, 149, 152, 153,
 157, 159–162, 160n8, 163n13,
 165, 165n19
 Islamic sectarian, 4

J
 Jebel Berri, Thaj, 28
 Jewish, 28n2, 36, 42, 44, 49, 50,
 76, 161

Jordan, 3, 38
 Jurisprudence, 23, 70, 74, 75, 152
 Justice, 3, 65, 77, 82, 140, 154

K
 Khasan, H., 14, 14n10
 Khuri, F.I., 22, 22n52, 39n43, 56,
 61–63, 65, 66, 81, 82, 84,
 93n25, 130, 160, 160n7, 160n8
Al kitman, 23
 Korans, 3, 69, 99, 110
 Kuwait, 8, 8n11, 9n18, 11n2, 13n6, 28,
 28n5, 60, 108, 108n40, 117n73,
 129n32, 130, 132n41, 137

L
 Labid, 27
 Lebanese, 14, 81
 Lebanon, 9n18, 11
 Levant, 3, 15, 42
 Libya, 11, 21
 Limbert, M., 18, 18n35, 71, 80,
 87n4, 123, 123n7, 140n14,
 141n16
 Linz, 21
 Lorimer's Gazetteer, 8

M
 Malayalee, 14
 Maliki, 2, 70
 Marawah, 29
 Maritime, 1, 31, 37, 39, 39n45, 51,
 53, 56, 58, 60, 61, 64, 82, 86, 87,
 91, 102, 128, 149, 152, 153, 159
 Missiology, 9
 Missionaries, 9, 9n18, 10, 24, 31, 59,
 60, 65, 74, 80, 87, 90, 95–100,
 103, 104, 105n32, 106–120,
 122, 135, 136, 147

Monasteries, 7, 8, 28–31, 30n13, 34,
39–41, 44, 50, 83, 146
Morocco, 17, 17n32, 18, 19n41, 20
Mu'ammār, A.Y., 23n55

N

Narratives, 3, 15, 77, 97
Nestorian, 7, 7n6, 29n8, 29n9, 30,
30n13, 32n19, 33, 38, 38n41,
39, 42, 42n56, 44, 45, 49n77
Nigeria, 3

O

Obstacles, 1
Oman, 1–8, 8n10, 10, 11n2, 13n7,
18, 18n34, 18n35, 20, 21, 23–25,
23n54, 23n56, 24n58, 24n59,
25n62, 27, 28, 28n2, 28n3, 31,
32, 35–37, 36n31, 36n34, 36n35,
42, 43, 45, 47, 49, 51, 53–78,
80–94, 87n3, 87n4, 88n5, 88n6,
89n8, 89n11, 90n16, 91n18,
92n21, 93n24, 94n28, 95n1, 96,
99–105, 100n15, 101n18,
105n29, 105n30, 107n37,
108–111, 113–116, 113n55,
114n60, 114n61, 114n62, 118,
118n75, 118n76, 120–123,
122n6, 126, 128, 130–132, 135,
136n3, 137–155, 137n4, 137n6,
139n11, 139n12, 141n16,
142n17, 157–163
Ontological, 17
Oppressive, 3, 126, 127, 129
Orthodox, 3, 30n14, 33, 34, 138,
142, 145, 147, 148
Ottoman, 12, 92
Oxford, 7n5, 9n14, 19n39, 20n48,
22n53, 23, 23n56, 24n57,

37n36, 40n47, 58, 72, 73, 88n7,
90n14, 92n22, 96n3, 96n6,
99n11, 102n20, 102n21,
103n22, 103n25, 104n27,
104n28, 106n35, 108n41,
108n42, 108n43, 109n44,
109n45, 109n46, 109n47,
110n49, 111n50, 111n51,
112n52, 113n56, 113n57,
114n58, 114n59, 115n63,
115n64, 115n65, 116n66,
116n67, 116n68, 117n70,
119n79, 120n83, 120n85,
124n9, 124n14, 154n17, 160n9

P

Pakistan, 14, 14n11, 100, 154, 161
Parsees, 122
Persecution, 3, 7, 27, 36, 41–44, 49,
51, 56, 90, 144, 157, 158,
158n4, 163
Persian, 1, 8n10, 13n5, 15, 32, 34,
36n31, 38, 39n45, 40–42,
41n52, 48–50, 48n74, 50n80,
54, 106, 111, 114n60, 117,
120n82, 128n28, 132n41
Portuguese, 8, 23, 35, 58, 61, 86–91,
86n1, 93, 116, 145
Protestant, 3, 9n18, 14, 16n20, 137,
142, 147–149

Q

Qatar, 7, 9, 9n15, 11n2, 18, 25n63,
28, 28n3, 30n14, 31, 32,
32n20, 35, 37, 40n48, 41,
41n53, 42, 47, 48, 51, 60,
126, 130, 132, 133
Qur'an, 17, 56, 66, 71, 72, 75, 77,
89, 152, 160, 161, 164, 164n15

R

Razik, S., 23
 Reformed Church, 8, 95, 98, 136n3,
 137, 138, 147, 154
 Regimes, 3, 21, 85, 90
 Rentier, 21, 22, 25, 28n2, 37, 57, 59,
 62, 68, 82, 102, 123–130, 163
 Rhythmic, 2
 Roman Catholic, 3, 8, 14, 49, 86,
 137, 138, 142, 145–149
 Ruwi, 2, 137, 146, 148

S

Said, 62
 Said bin Khalfan al Khalili, 66
 Said bin Khamis al Kharrousi, 66
 Said bin Sultan, 63
 Said, E., 17, 17n28, 97, 97n8
 Said ibn-Nasir, 70
 Said, Sayyed, 109
 Said, Sultan Qaboos Bin, 147
 Sarawak, 14n11, 15
 Saudi Arabia, 2, 4, 5, 7, 7n6, 9, 9n15,
 11n2, 13n7, 15, 15n19, 17n24,
 28, 32, 38, 47, 126, 127, 129, 137
 Scholars, 1, 16, 25, 33, 34, 47, 54, 70,
 71, 75, 77–80, 82, 83, 130, 133,
 154, 160
 Shafi, 2
 Shaikh, 20
 Sharjah, 9
 Shia, 24, 47, 81, 127, 128, 138, 155,
 158, 160
Al shira, 24
 Sir Bani Yas, 7n6, 28–30, 29n8,
 30n13, 30n14, 44
 Skinner, R.F., 24
 Sociological, 15, 19, 20, 124, 131, 139

Sohar, 7, 31, 32, 35, 36, 43, 62, 90,
 91, 111, 130, 146, 148
 South India, 14, 147
 Stereotypes, 5
 Sunni, 1, 22, 47, 48, 55, 69, 70, 81,
 84, 127, 128, 138, 155, 158,
 160, 161
 Sunni Islamic, 1
 Syria, 9n18, 11, 41, 49

T

Tafsir, 24, 69, 70, 74, 77, 161,
 164, 165
 Tarut, 28, 32, 35, 42
Terrains of Exchange, 22, 22n53, 96n3
 Theological, 4, 5, 7, 11, 24, 25, 44,
 45, 48, 58, 63, 66, 71, 73, 74,
 77, 81, 83, 84, 89, 96, 101,
 107, 112, 142, 154, 155, 161,
 162, 164
 The *Three Ts*, 27
 Tolerance, 2, 5, 14, 27, 44, 60, 61,
 64, 76–78, 88, 123, 129, 153,
 155, 159
 Tomarsa, 29
 Tribalism, 5, 6, 9n18, 16, 19, 20, 36,
 58, 59, 131
 Trimingham, J.S., 6n3, 15, 15n17,
 28n1, 36, 36n33, 36n34,
 45, 45n63
 Turkey, 3

U

Ulama, 16, 17, 160
 United Arab Emirates, 3, 7, 7n6, 7n8,
 8n9, 9, 29n8, 31, 31n17, 32, 42,
 49n79, 87n2, 114n61, 133

V

- Van Gorder, A.C., 15, 15n12
Vita Ioniae, 7
 Von Grunebaum, G.E., 17

W

- Wahhabi, 15, 63–66, 81, 86, 94,
 114, 126
 Watt, W.M., 17, 17n29
 Weber, M., 16–18,
 16n20, 25
 Wilkinson, J.C., 23, 23n56, 54, 58,
 73, 131n38
 Woodbury, Robert, 9, 9n18

Y

- Yamama, 29, 32
 Yemen, 8, 11, 35, 36, 42–44, 49, 59,
 80, 100
 Yemeni, 1, 32, 58, 61

Z

- Al-Zoby, M.A., 20
Al-zuhur, 23
 Zwemer, Peter, 103, 105, 120
 Zwemer, Samuel, 8, 59, 60, 96n4,
 98–100, 100n14, 102, 102n19,
 106n34, 107, 118, 119,
 119n78, 119n80